

**Charles Glass:  
Inside the Syrian Furnace**

**The New York Review**  
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**Geoffrey O'Brien:  
Patti Smith's Dream Book**



**HUGH EAKIN:**

**SMUGGLING REFUGEES  
INTO EUROPE  
THE UNTOLD STORY**

**Diane Johnson:  
Franzen's 'Purity' Violated**

**Cass Sunstein:  
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**Alexander von Humboldt**

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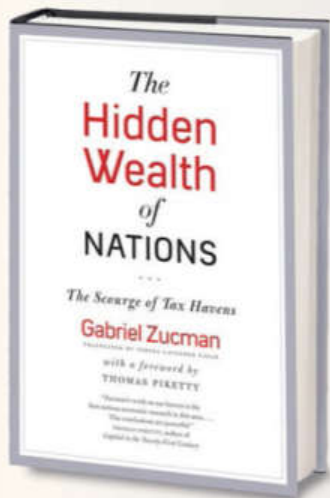
**Max Planck**

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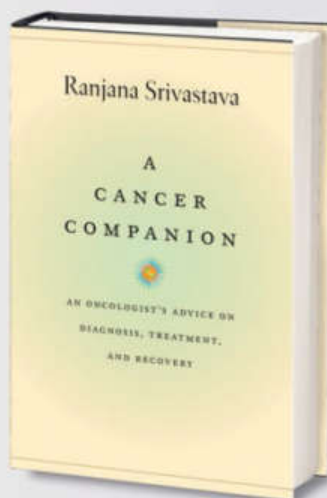
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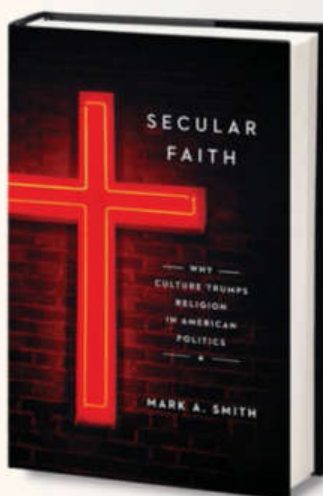
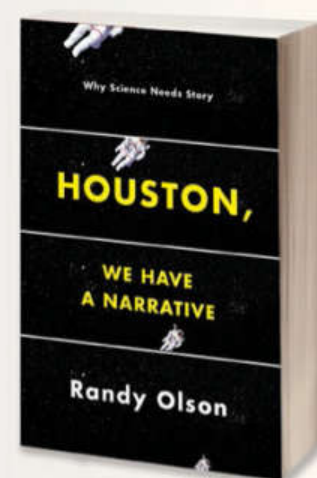
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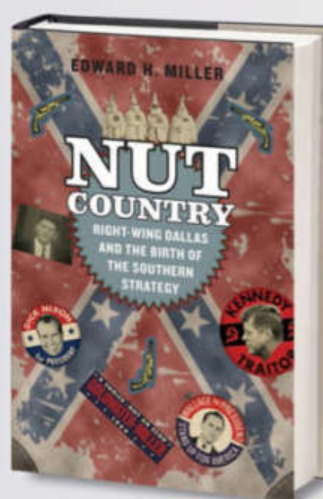
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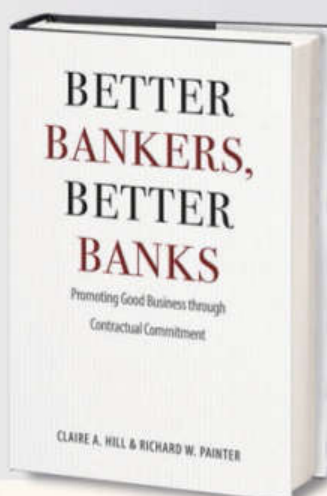
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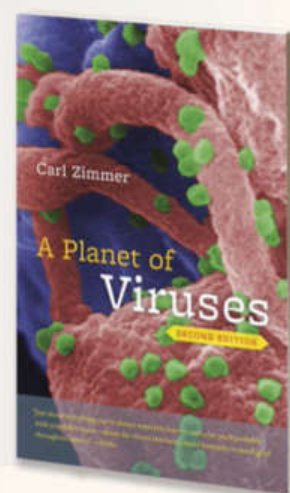
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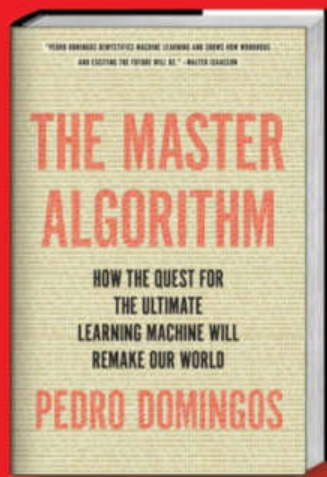
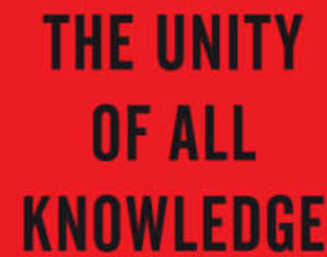
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On the cover: Patti Smith, 1976 (Gijsber Hanekroot/Redferns/Getty Images); refugees, mostly from Syria and Afghanistan, at the Hungarian–Serbian border, September 2015 (Thomas Dworzak/Magnum Photos). The drawings on pages 30 and 48 are by David Levine. The drawings on pages 36, 56, 57, and 75 are by Pancho. The illustrations on pages 71, 75, and 77 are by James Ferguson.

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author of *Crossing the Chasm*

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# Her Private Papers

**M Train**

by Patti Smith.  
Knopf, 253 pp., \$25.00

**Geoffrey O'Brien**

Patti Smith has published a new book, *M Train*—a work whose charm has much to do with its lithe resistance to the constrictions of any particular genre—as her earlier *Just Kids* (2010), her memoir of her early partnership with Robert Mapplethorpe, continues to exercise a lively influence. Even before Showtime announced over the summer that it would be the basis for a TV miniseries, it was clear that *Just Kids* was sending down roots in the culture. For younger readers it serves as an irresistible window into the New York era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, what with a supporting cast including Janis Joplin, William S. Burroughs, Andy Warhol, Jimi Hendrix, and Allen Ginsberg, set against such backdrops as Max's Kansas City and the Chelsea Hotel. But I suspect that beyond adding another layer to the collective legend of that period, it will take its place as one of those durable books that people turn to for an object lesson, a demonstration of possibilities, on how to make a beginning in life.

In recounting how Smith and Mapplethorpe fled the prospect of narrow futures (she escaping soul-crushing factory work in southern New Jersey and he the limits of a rigidly Catholic family in Floral Park, Long Island) and scrounged out independent artistic lives for themselves in New York City, *Just Kids* relives the bedeviling confusion and panic of starting from zero—zero resources and zero encouragement—and attempting to make a life one can call one's own. To invoke the vulnerability and magical destinies of fairy-tale characters—"We were as Hansel and Gretel and we ventured out into the black forest of the world," Smith writes of herself and Mapplethorpe—is to reenter the eddy of uncertainty that the young know well yet so often, once settled in life, tend to smooth over in memory. In Smith's pages that swirl becomes a new encapsulation of an old romantic ideal, in the image of the young couple who nourish each other's artistic energies. It is like the resurrection of a discarded dream: that hermetic religion of art in which love transcends itself in a magnificent consuming alchemy to yield selfless art on the far end of its grueling process.

For latecomers such romanticism is tinged with the exoticism of a city that no longer exists, a world of lost possibilities where a low-rent marginal existence was possible if not necessarily comfortable, a city for scavengers where ghostly daguerreotypes and talismanic religious objects might be retrieved from the unlikeliest shelves and street corner bundles, and where, in the absence of MFA programs and other well-organized channels for the creative process, those just starting out were obliged to make things up for themselves, relying on whatever tutelary guides they were fortunate enough to encounter. When Smith writes of herself at the outset of her artistic odyssey that "Rimbaud held the keys to a mystical language that I devoured even as I could not fully decipher it," she speaks

for several generations of seekers who found their way to the photograph on the cover of the old New Directions edition of *Illuminations* as if to an icon set up for their guidance alone. When they meet, Smith and Mapplethorpe are artists who have not yet found their art, and the heart of the narrative is the thoroughly unprogrammed way in which they make their way toward the specific practices through which they will realize themselves.

What the book expresses supremely well is the tentativeness of every movement forward, the sense of following a path so risky, so sketchily perceptible, that at any moment one might go astray and never be heard from again, never perhaps even hear from the deepest part of oneself again. For a book that ends in success, it is acutely sensitive to that abyss of failure that haunts the attempt to become any kind of artist. In reading it I was irresistibly reminded not so much of career triumphs as of all the others who were just as much a part of the New York that Smith evokes so persuasively, the crowd of aspirants who likewise sought to become painters, actors, dancers, poets, photographers, songwriters, filmmakers, novelists, or practitioners of some hybrid art form not yet imagined: the ones who stopped, or died, or lost their way, or drifted into one kind of silence or another. I close my eyes and see fantastic canvases populated by winged creatures and devouring disembodied maws, hear shapeless extended guitar solos that sought to describe the creation of the cosmos, screen miles of unedited footage from dream movies destined never to be finished.

*Just Kids* is a story of success, not failure, as it progresses toward Mapplethorpe's wide recognition for a photographic mode seamlessly fusing his aesthetic, religious, and sexual obsessions, and Patti Smith's unforeseeable emergence as a new kind of rock star for whom doo-wop and symbolist poetry, three-chord anthems and Burroughsian apocalypses just naturally went together. Smith elides the triumphal aspect, however, and the book ends somberly as she recounts Mapplethorpe's death from AIDS and mourns him in a series of memorial poems: "Every chasm entered/Every story wound/And wild leaves are falling/Falling to the ground."

I remember hearing of Smith first as a neighborhood rumor and then, by the time she was performing widely, a local legend who managed to combine the roles of poet, visual artist, and rock and roller, a skeletally thin black-clad androgynous merging of Rimbaud and Pirate Jenny, or of Irma Vep and one of William Burroughs's Wild Boys.\* When it came out in 1975, Smith's first album, *Horses*, caught the ear with

\*For a detailed account of Smith's early performing career, see Luc Sante, "The Mother Courage of Rock," *The New York Review*, February 9, 2012.

the rough edges of a homegrown vatic protopunk utterance right from the opening track with its declaration that "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine" and its reworking of Van Morrison's "Gloria"—"Oh I put my spell on her here she comes/Walking down the street here she comes/Coming through my door here she comes/Crawling up my stair here she comes"—to assert that rock and roll really did belong to anybody with the nerve to transform it into whatever sort of poetry she desired. Delicacy of execution was not the issue, but unwavering insistence, prophetic identity. What lingered was not so much musical structures as the indelibility of certain cries, like the refrain, in the suicide dirge "Redondo Beach," that sounded like the anguished transmutation of a chorus from



Patti Smith, New York City, early 1970s;  
photograph by Judy Linn

a Top 40 hit of the girl-group era: "are you gone gone."

The shamanic impulse—invocation of spirits, channeling of the voices of dead poets, prayer to unknown forces—pulses through the three hundred pages or so of Smith's *Collected Lyrics, 1970–2015*, even if the texture and tenor lost some of their early ferocity as she went from local legend to authentic rock star to a kind of transnational cultural ambassador. As the years go by, the coded transmissions all the more potent for their partial obscurity—"You know I see it written across the sky/People rising from the highway/And war war is the battle cry/And it's wild wild wild" ("Ask the Angels," 1977)—give way to more clearly decipherable global messages on, say, the Iraq War: "Your bombs/You sent them down on our city/Shock and awe/Like some crazy t.v. show." Having a worldwide audience must make it hard to retreat into those secret spaces that are so readily available to the young artist not yet known.

I had begun to lose track of Patti Smith's music as my ears took me in other directions, so that increasingly I heard her if at all from another room or as background, on someone else's radio or turntable. Thus I was not so acutely aware that at the beginning of the 1980s she had largely left the music scene, gotten married (to bassist Fred "Sonic" Smith of the MC5), moved to Detroit, and raised two children. After her husband's sudden death in 1994, she resumed an active career of recording and touring, and in decades since has been most visible, whether exhibiting her art at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, accepting induction into the Rock and

Roll Hall of Fame, or appearing briefly in Jean-Luc Godard's *Film Socialisme*, not to mention a cameo on the TV series *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*.

Of all that activity she has little to say in *M Train*. In fact the book opens with the declaration: "It's not so easy writing about nothing." The words are spoken by a dream cowboy, establishing from the start a freedom in moving in and out of frames, and in speaking from within a private space. Everything that happens, at first, seems intended to stake out a zone far removed from performance or public life, as if she were murmuring to herself, while she slips into a coat and walks over to a café on Bedford Street, reiterating: "I'm sure I could write endlessly about nothing. If only I had nothing to say." The season is dark and autumnal, the café is empty

in the early morning, she drinks the black coffee that will permeate the book as if the idea of that aroma were a necessary ritual to sustain a link with language.

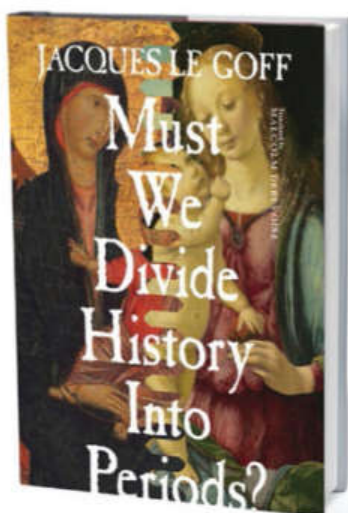
*M Train* might be taken as a most roundabout and leisurely way of answering the question "How have you been?" The answer comes in the form of fragments of waking fantasy, literary commentaries, extended reminiscences, evocations of lost objects, travel notations, tallies of places and names and flavors ("Lists. Small anchors in the swirl of transmitted waves, reverie, and saxophone

solos"). By turns it is daybook, dream-book, commonplace book. Under all lies a grief that is never allowed to overwhelm the writing but is, it would seem, its groundwater. She allows herself to begin anywhere and break off anywhere, thus realizing the secret yearning of almost anyone who sits down to write a book: that it might be possible for the thing simply to create itself out of necessity, to emerge as if by a natural process of unfolding.

It is in its way an obsessively literary book: "Writers and their process. Writers and their books. I cannot assume the reader will be familiar with them all, but in the end is the reader familiar with me? Does the reader wish to be so?" Most of the time she is in conversation with a myriad of other books, some familiar contemporaries (Bolaño, Murakami, Sebald, Aira), some primordial influences (Genet, Bowles, Brecht, Burroughs, and of course Rimbaud), and some from a shelf of childhood favorites, *The Little Lame Prince*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *A Girl of the Limberlost*. To write is to be in the presence of books: "I prefer to work from my bed, as if I'm a convalescent in a Robert Louis Stevenson poem." This Stevenson reference echoes a line in *Just Kids*, where she invokes *A Child's Garden of Verses* in connection with a long period of childhood illness.

The recurrence of the image triggered for this reader at least a powerful recollection of the 1944 edition of *A Child's Garden* that was almost my first reading matter, illustrated by Toni Frissell with photographs that included, to accompany "The Land of Counterpane," an unforgettable image of a sick child—his face a study in unworldly absorption—propped up in bed, studying the toy soldiers he has





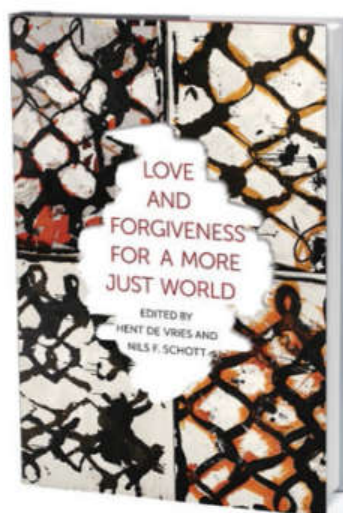
## Must We Divide History Into Periods?

JACQUES LE GOFF

*Translated by Malcolm DeBevoise*

"Le Goff was one of the truly great historians of our time, and his final reflections on the nature and responsibilities of our craft are lucid, profound, and humane."

—R. I. Moore, Newcastle University

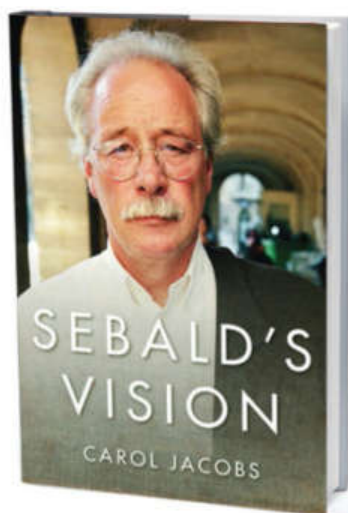


## Love and Forgiveness for a More Just World

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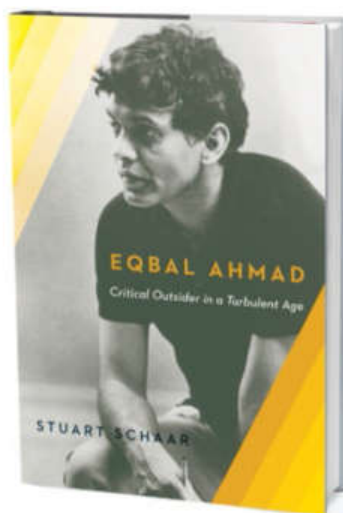
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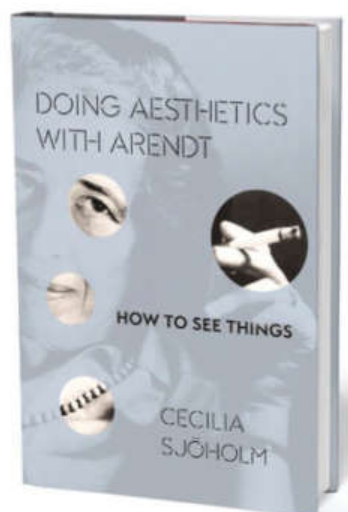
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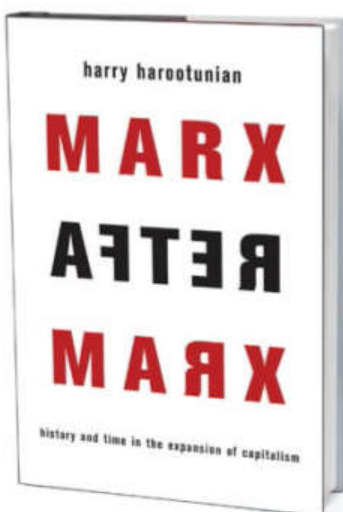
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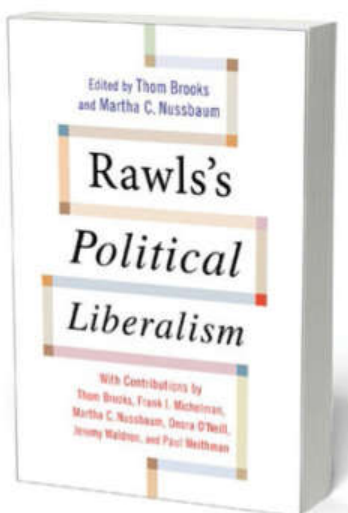
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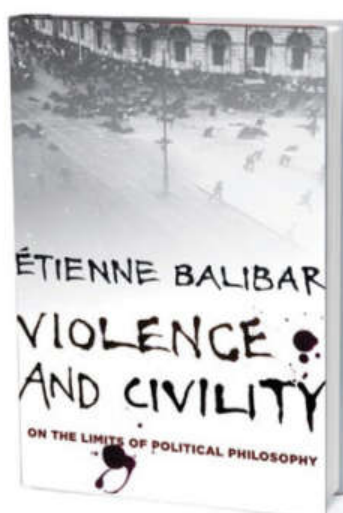
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*On the Limits of Political Philosophy*

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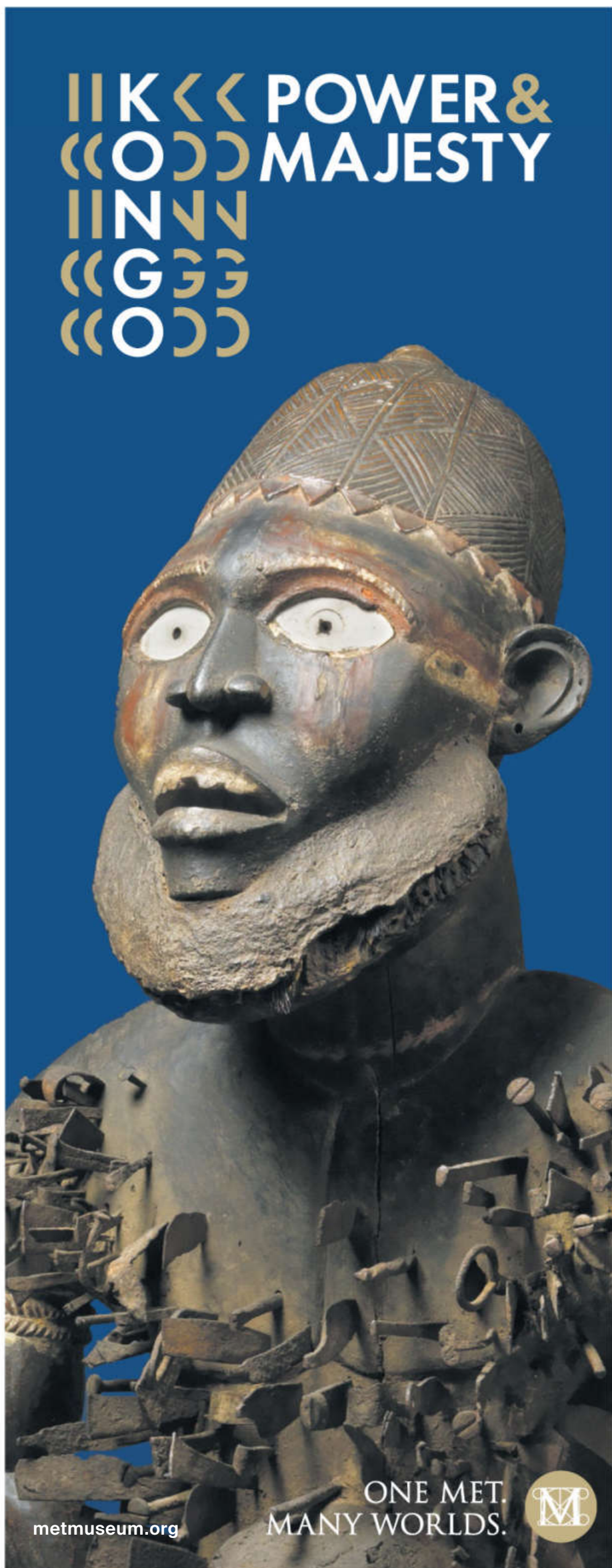
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Power Figure (Nkisi N'Kondi: Mangaaka), detail, Kongo peoples, 19th century, Manchester Museum, University of Manchester. Photo: Peter Zera, The Photograph Studio, The Metropolitan Museum of Art © 2015.

deployed on the bedcover. Whether or not Patti Smith was reading Stevenson in that same edition, she had certainly touched me on the level of the deepest readerly associations. That indeed was reading: that earliest awe of communing with words and images before even knowing what “words” and “images” might be, of forging a sense of community with beings that the words and images made shimmeringly half-present. To touch on such experiences, to insist on the primacy of those private worlds, is an intimate sort of whisper, an ultimate indulgence, seeking no wider justification. The pleasure of the book is inseparable from that indulgence.

With no sense of pastiche or irony she lets herself write in a language sprung from old books, of “a looming continuum of calamitous skies...a light yet lingering malaise...a fascination for melancholia.” In London, the Nelson column and Kensington Gardens are “all disappearing into the silvered atmosphere of an interminable fairy tale,” as she travels by taxi through thick fog “flanked by the shivering outline of trees, as if hastily sketched by the posthumous hand of Arthur Rackham.” We are back among mist-haunted decadents and symbolists, back among the artifacts of everything long ago left behind that yet insists on surging up once again, in an inscape of reverie drawing on any usable association from any available epoch.

When the modern world intrudes it seems already a ghost of itself. In a moment of extreme disorientation the words that emerge from the void are from the Clovers’ “Love Potion #9”—“I didn’t know if it was day or night”—as if they were from a mystical treatise by Jakob Boehme. Moving from one solitary room to another, from New York to Berlin to London to Tokyo, she tunes in to an array of TV crime shows, whether American or British or Swedish, whose protagonists in turn become part of her syncretistic pantheon.

The ghostly presences may be mute objects: her father’s chair, which she never sits in, but whose “cigarette burn scarring the seat gives the chair a feel of life,” or a lost black coat, a gift from an older poet, whose disappearance is repeatedly mourned: “The dead speak. We have forgotten how to listen. Have you seen my coat?” Rituals establishing links with the dead and disappeared are almost the bass pattern here. In a long episode early in the book Smith recounts how she and her husband traveled, on their first anniversary, to French Guiana to visit the ruins of the penal colony where convicts were held for transfer to Devil’s Island, a visit inspired by Jean Genet’s description of the place in *The Thief’s Journal* as “hallowed ground” associated with “a hierarchy of inviolable criminality, a manly saintliness that flowered at its crown in the terrible reaches of French Guiana.”

Genet was still alive at the time and the intention was to bring him a box of earth and stone gathered from the site. This did not come to pass, but in keeping with her sense of ritual obligation Smith travels in Morocco to Genet’s grave in the fishing port of Larache. A Polaroid of the occasion is included in *M Train*, one of a series of photographs extending such observances—pilgrimages to the graves of Sylvia Plath or Yukio Mishima, or to contemplate the crutches of Frida Kahlo or the walking stick of Virginia Woolf—by another form of memorial preservation. Preservation is counterbalanced of course by the march of disappearance, a disappearance that outstrips Smith’s own book. When her favorite café closes she takes her morning cup at Caffè Dante on MacDougal Street, itself closed down since her book was written, and in Tokyo stays at the Hotel Okura, a modernist monument imminently slated for demolition.

If the book represents a sort of negotiation (through rites of pilgrimage and writing and art and divination by tarot card) with the implacable forces of the world, the world finds its way into the book through nonnegotiable devastation. Smith buys a house on Rockaway Beach only to see the beach take the full brunt of Hurricane Sandy. On her visit to Japan she witnesses the aftermath of the 2011 Tohoku tsunami: “The rice fields, now unyielding, were covered with close to a million fish carcasses, a rotting stench that hung in the air for months.” These catastrophes set a contrary wind sweeping through the inward consciousness she cultivates in the pages of *M Train*. They serve as a brutal wake-up from what can begin to seem like relentless spiraling into a private world.

What rescues the book from that self-absorption—from the amorphous groping of sentences like “I wondered if it was possible to devise a new kind of thinking” or “In my way of thinking, anything is possible”—is its unapologetic informality. “I have lived in my own book,” she writes toward the end, and it is hard to argue with that. It’s a bit like the title of the old Bill Evans album: *Conversations with Myself*. Or, in its quality of simply laying out the contents of one’s mind to see what they look like, that altogether different book by George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*.

Perhaps *M Train* represents the attempt by someone whose career is as public as can be imagined to stake out a zone of inviolable privacy, albeit through the public act of writing a book meant for publication. That paradox, of a solitude played out in plain view, plays about the edges of *M Train* but does not overwhelm it. Writing about nothing is after all one of the most ancient and gratifying of literary practices, often so much more rewarding than more formal chronicles and autobiographies and for that reason something that always feels a bit illicit. □

STANLEY HOFFMANN  
(1928–2015)

We mourn the death of Stanley Hoffmann, who contributed over fifty articles to *The New York Review* between 1964 and 2011.





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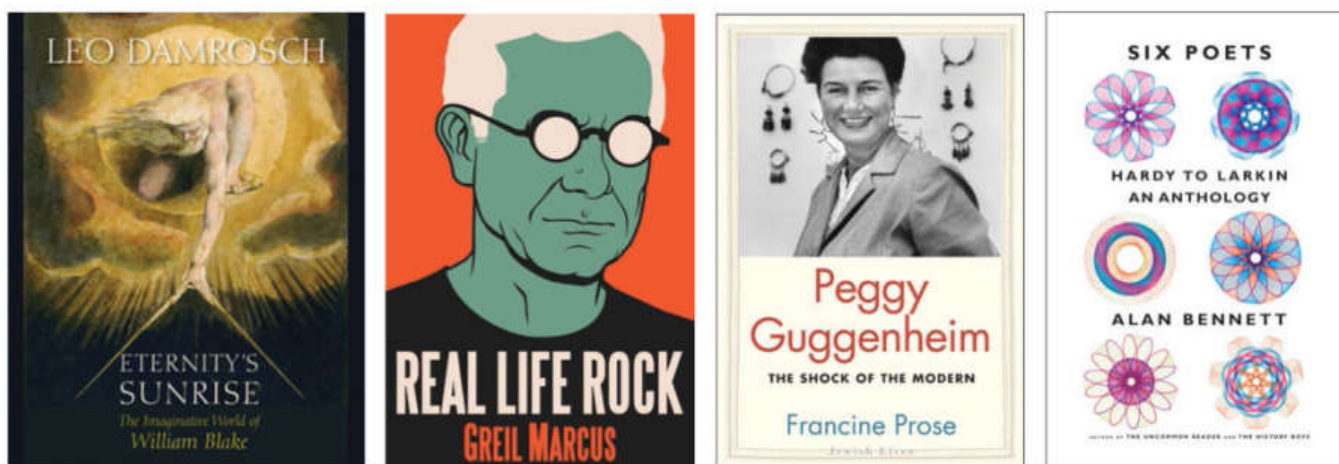
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# In the Syrian Deadlands

Charles Glass

Folk memories endure, mothers' and grandmothers' sagas trumping documents in neglected archives. What will Syria's youth, when they are old, tell their children? All will have stories of cowering in their flimsy houses while bombs fell, of the deadening existence of refugee camps, or of escapes through treacherous seas and perilous highways to uncertain lives in strange lands. My maternal grandmother left Mount Lebanon, then part of Syria, as a child in the late nineteenth century during a confrontation between the Christians of her village and their Ottoman rulers. Although her father was killed a few months before she was born, she told me many times how he faced Turkish troops on horseback as if she had witnessed it. I don't know what really happened; but her stories, including of a river that was so cold it could crack a watermelon in two, remain undeniable truths to her descendants.

Syrians today are enduring a brutal, unending ordeal that reenacts the drama of their ancestors during a prior war exactly one century ago that their families, novelists, and poets preserved for them. What we know as World War I was to Syrians *Seferberlik*, from the Arabic for "travel across the land," when military conscription, forced labor battalions, machine-age weaponry, arbitrary punishment, pestilence, and famine undid in four years all that the Ottomans had achieved over the previous four centuries. The Palestinian sociologist Salim Tamari saw that period as

four miserable years of tyranny symbolized by the military dictatorship of Ahmad Cemal [or Jemal] Pasha in Syria, *seferberlik* (forced conscription and exile), and the collective hanging of Arab patriots in Beirut's Burj Square on August 15, 1916.

Turkey's institutionalized sadism added to the woes of Syrians, who grew hungrier each year because of the Anglo-French blockade that kept out, as American and European Union sanctions do today, many of the basic staples needed for survival.

No part of what was then called Syria, which included today's Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel, avoided the cataclysm. An economics professor at Beirut's Syrian Protestant College wrote, "You never saw a starving person, did you? May the Almighty preserve you from this sight!!!" Rafael de Nogales, a freebooting Venezuelan officer in the Ottoman army, recorded that

Aleppo kept on filling up with mendicant and pest-stricken deportees who died in the streets by the hundreds, and infected the rest of the population to such an extent that on some days the funeral carts

were insufficient to carry the dead to the cemeteries.

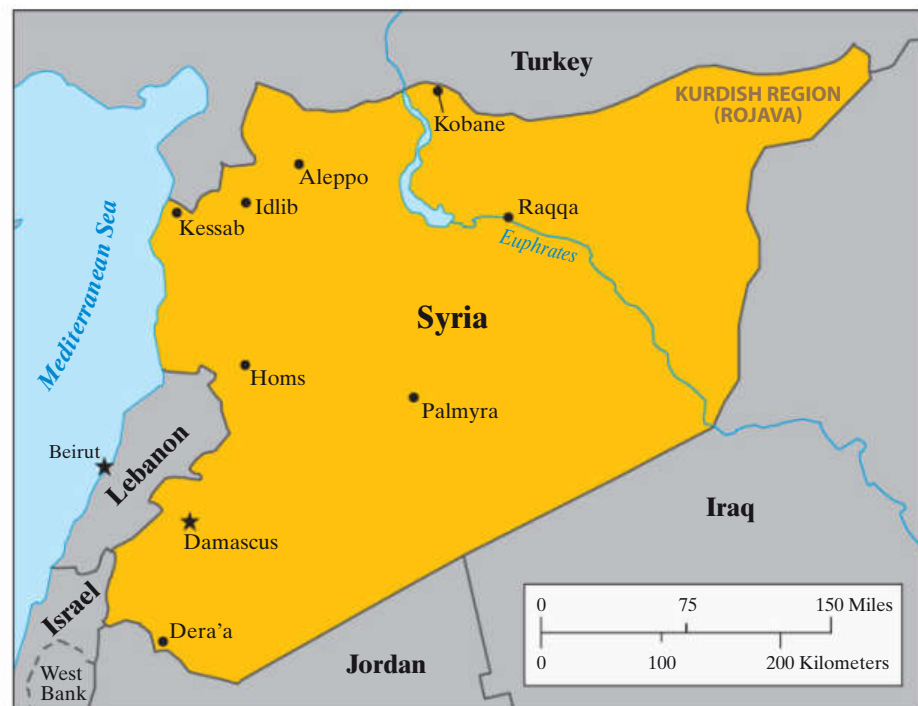
The locust infestation of 1915 and hoarding by Beirut's grain merchants aggravated a famine so severe that there were many tales of cannibalism. Hana Mina, a Syrian novelist born just after the war, wrote in his novel *Fragments of Memory*, "During the *Safar Barrlik*, mothers... became like cats and ate their children." A half-million out of four million inhabitants in Greater Syria perished from starvation, disease, and violence.

The four and a half years since March 2011 are recreating the suffering of a century ago: malnutrition, starvation, epidemics, the exodus of most of the population to other parts of Syria or to foreign lands, the brutality of the combatants, the traumatization of children, and Great Power preference for victory over the inhabitants' well-being. An anonymous Syrian poet, in words his

twenty-first-century countrymen might echo, wrote:

*The Drums of War are beating  
their sad rhythm  
And the living people, wrapped in  
their shroud  
Believing the war will not last a  
year...  
Dear God, may this fifth year be  
the end of it.*

That fifth year, 1918, was the end of it, but this century's war is heading toward its sixth year with no prospect of a conclusion. Thousands of Russian military advisers are joining the fight on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad, as Iran and its Lebanese surrogate, Hezbollah, have from the beginning. The United States and its regional allies are increasing the flow of arms to the rebels. What was true in 2011 holds today: neither side has the power to defeat the other.



Mike King



A Syrian man carrying his daughters across rubble after a barrel bomb attack on the rebel-held neighborhood of Kalasa in Aleppo, September 2015

Karam al-Masri/AFP/Getty Images

Returning to Damascus last month after a year's absence, I discovered new dynamics. Last year, the regime seemed to be gaining the upper hand. The rebels had evacuated Homs, the first city they conquered. Jihadists had withdrawn from the Armenian village of Kessab near the Turkish border in the northwest, and Assad's army was encroaching into the rebel-held Damascus suburbs. The rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) was causing the foreign supporters of the rebellion to recalibrate and consider making Assad an ally against the fanatics who threatened to export the war to the West itself. Popular complaints focused on electricity shortages, loss of wages, the hazards of sporadic rebel shelling, and the hardships of daily survival.

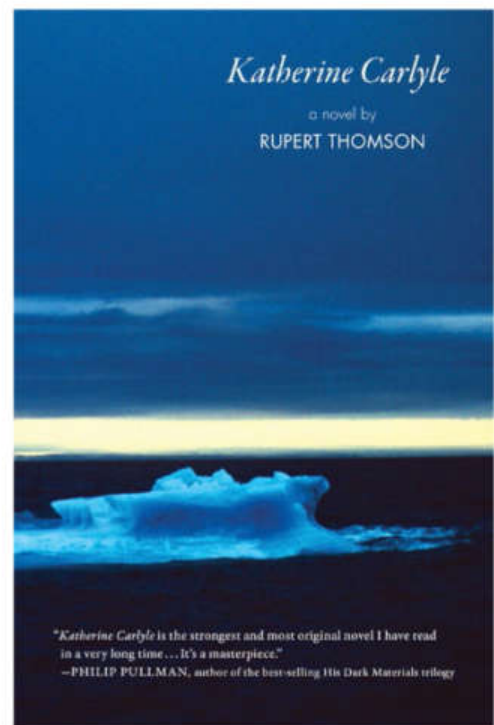
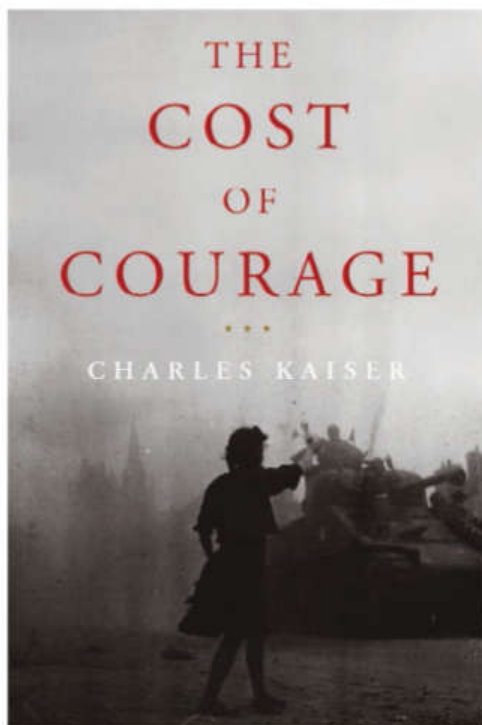
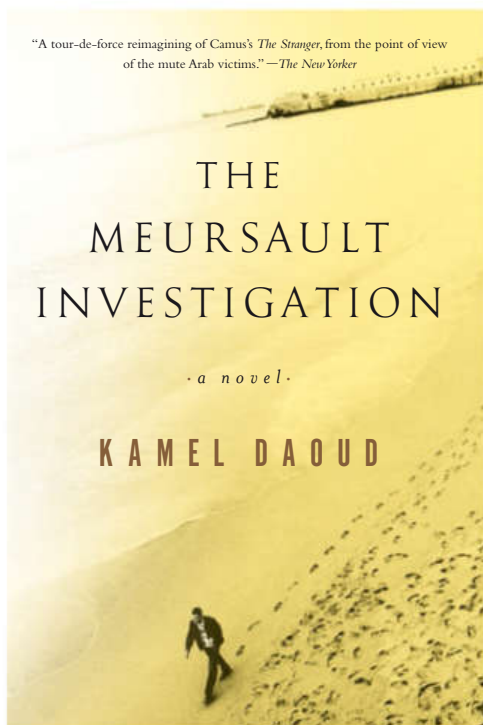
A year later, all has changed. The regime is in retreat. It lost Idlib province in the north. Jihadi

forces backed by Turkey have surrounded the vital commercial entrepôt and cosmopolitan center of Aleppo. The jewel of the desert, the ancient Roman and Arab city of Palmyra, is in the hands of ISIS militants who tortured and beheaded an eighty-two-year-old antiquities scholar and are destroying one ancient monument after another. Young men are emigrating to avoid being drafted to fight for any side in what seems like an eternal and inconclusive war.

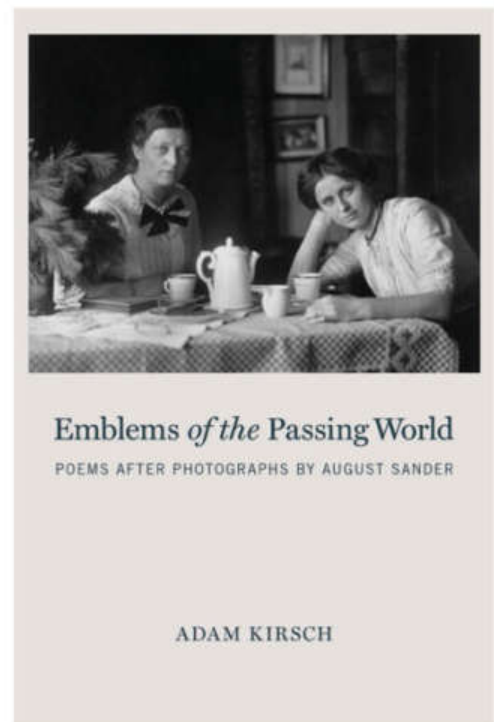
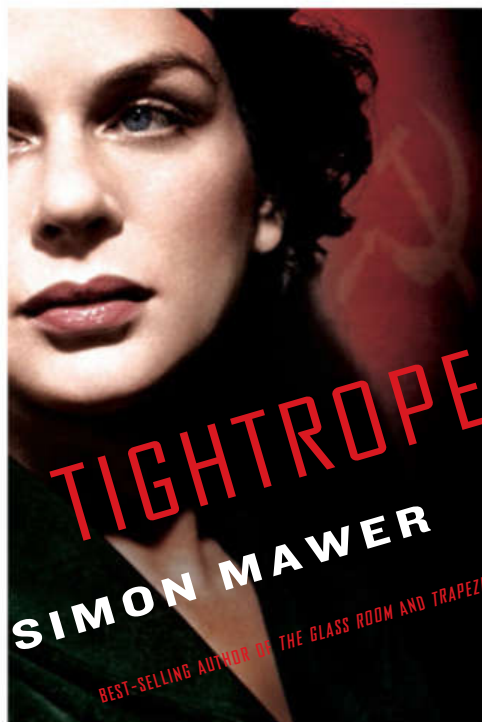
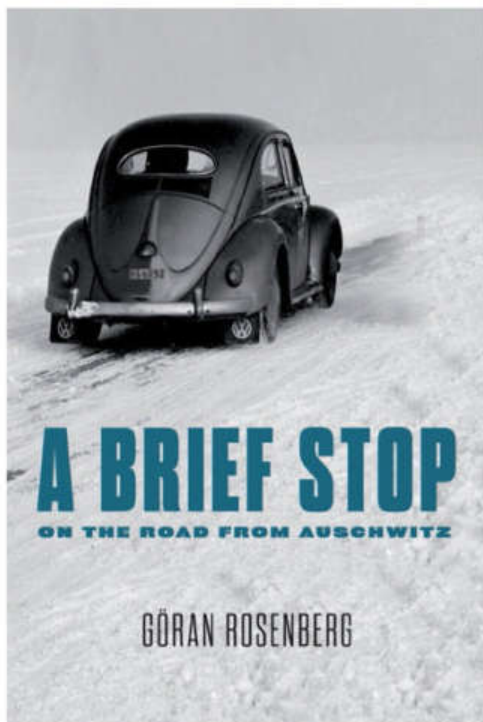
The few who remain are sons without brothers, who cannot be conscripted under Syrian law, which recognizes that the loss of an only son means the end of the family. As in World War I, this has led to a surfeit of women supporting their families by any means necessary. Inflation is around 40 percent. Estimates of territory held by regime opponents run from the United Nations' 65 percent to the *Jane's* report of 83 percent, while the UN estimates that anywhere between 60 and 80 percent of the population still within the country now live in areas held by the government. Migration from rebel-held areas into the capital has, as measured by the company that collects city waste, multiplied Damascus's population five times, from about two million before the war to ten million today. Elizabeth Hoff, director of the World Health Organization in Syria, said, "Nine out of ten people in Damascus hospitals are not from Damascus. They come from Raqqa and elsewhere." Raqqa is now held by ISIS.

Supporters of the original uprising of 2011 imagined a quick victory over the dictator along the lines of what happened in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. A Syrian friend of mine, now living in exile, told me that the American ambassador, Robert Ford, just before he withdrew from Damascus in October 2011, tried to recruit him to take part in a government that he promised would shortly replace Assad's. When

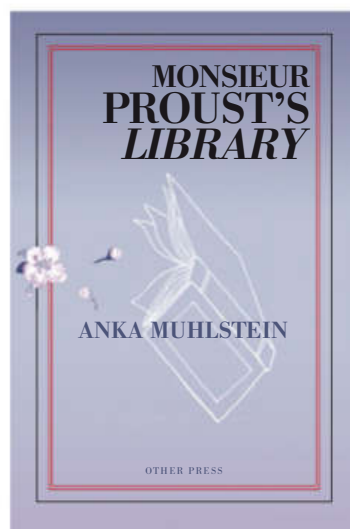
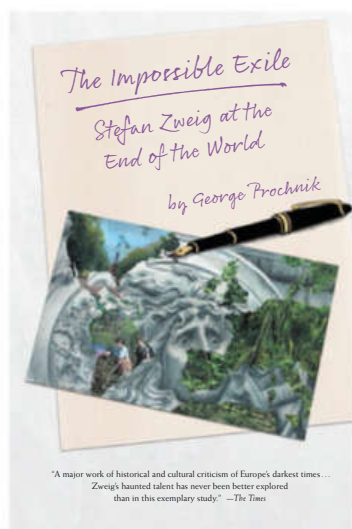
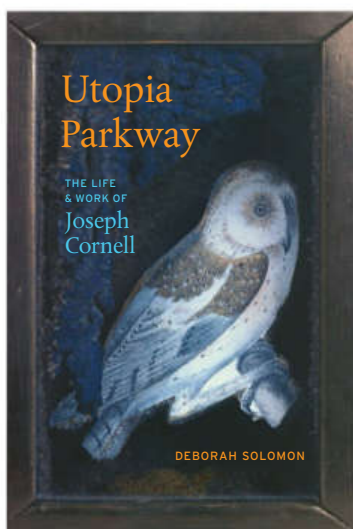




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the French ambassador to Syria, Eric Chevallier, left Damascus on March 6, 2012, barely one year into the war, he told friends that he would be back when a post-Assad government was installed “in two months.”

Since then, with Assad still in power, the death toll has climbed to at least 320,000. Out of a total population of 22 million before the war, more than four million Syrians have fled the country, and another 7.6 million are displaced within it. With Syria’s neighbors overwhelmed, hundreds of thousands of Syrians are now trying to seek refuge in Europe, causing one of the greatest challenges to the EU in its history. The government-in-waiting that Ford and other Western diplomats had hoped to install in Damascus has collapsed amid internal squabbling and a lack of committed fighters.

The only forces fighting with success against the Assad regime are Sunni Muslim holy warriors who are destroying all that was best in Syria: its mosaic of different sects and ethnic communities—including Christians, Druze, Turkmen, Yazidis, and Kurds, along with Alawites and Sunni Arabs—its heritage of ancient monuments, its ancient manuscripts and Sumerian tablets, its industrial and social infrastructure, and its tolerance of different social customs. “The worst thing is not the violence,” the Armenian Orthodox primate of Syria, Bishop Armash Nalbandian, told me. “It is this new hatred.”

In a war that is now in its fifth year and has left little of pre-war Syrian society intact, everyone seems to be asking, in one form or another, how did we get here and where are we going? What is the reason for the savagery from all sides in what has become an apocalyptic struggle for dominance and survival? Why, back in 2011, did the regime shoot at demonstrators who were not shooting at the government, and why did the uprising come to depend on a contest by weapons, in which the regime would hold the upper hand?

The United States encouraged the opposition from the beginning. *The Guardian* reported on October 24, 2011:

The US vice-president, Joe Biden, last week triggered speculation by saying that the military model used in Libya—US air power in support of rebels on the ground backed by French and British special forces—could be used elsewhere.

It did not happen, although the CIA trained rebels in Jordan and Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar provided arms, and Turkey opened its borders to jihadis from around the world to wreak havoc in Syria. However, Western predictions of the regime’s quick demise were soon shown to be false.

A consensus among the US, Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Israel held that Assad’s strategic alliance with Iran was detrimental to all of their interests. These powers perceived an expansionist Iran using to its advantage indigenous Shiites in Bahrain, Yemen, and Lebanon along with the Alawite minority in Syria, which has long been allied with the Shiites. They sought to eclipse the “Shiite Crescent” on the battlefields of Syria. Rather than eliminate Iranian influence in Syria, however, they have multiplied it. The

Syrian military, once an independent secular force that looked to Iran and Hezbollah for men and weapons, now relies on Iran to determine strategy in a war of survival that, if the regime wins, will leave the Iranians in a stronger position than they were before the war.

Major military decisions come from the Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the astute commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ elite Quds force, rather than from Syria’s discredited officer class. In Aleppo, residents speak of an Iranian officer called Jawal commanding Shiite militia forces from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon against the Sunni jihadists who have the city almost surrounded.

“Most people feel we are under Iranian occupation,” a Sunni businessman

Russia has pledged to continue military support for Assad’s forces. Many Syrians welcome this less to confront ISIS and its like-minded jihadi rivals than to offset the Iranians and their clients from Hezbollah, the Iraqi militias, and Afghanistan’s Shiite Hazaras.

The West and its local allies are suffering the unintended consequences of their policies, as the Ottomans did when they declared war on the Allies in 1914. Turkey’s goals then were to take Egypt back from the British and expand its empire into the Turkish-speaking Muslim lands of the Russian Empire. To say that the Young Turk triumvirate guiding Sultan Mehmed V’s policies miscalculated is a historic understatement: rather than achieve either objective, they lost all of their

the southern desert town of Dera’a, he detected a significant change: “On 18 April, at the demonstrations in Homs, the biggest banner said, ‘No to Iran. No to Hezbollah. We need a Muslim leader who feels God.’”

“A Muslim leader who feels God” was code for a Sunni Muslim to replace Assad as leader of Syria, in which 70 percent of the population are Sunni. At the time, Iran and Hezbollah did not concern most dissidents, who regarded Assad’s alliances with the two Shiite powers as less important than their demands for genuine elections, multiparty democracy, a free press, an independent judiciary, and the end of elite corruption that was crippling the economy. Samman recalled:

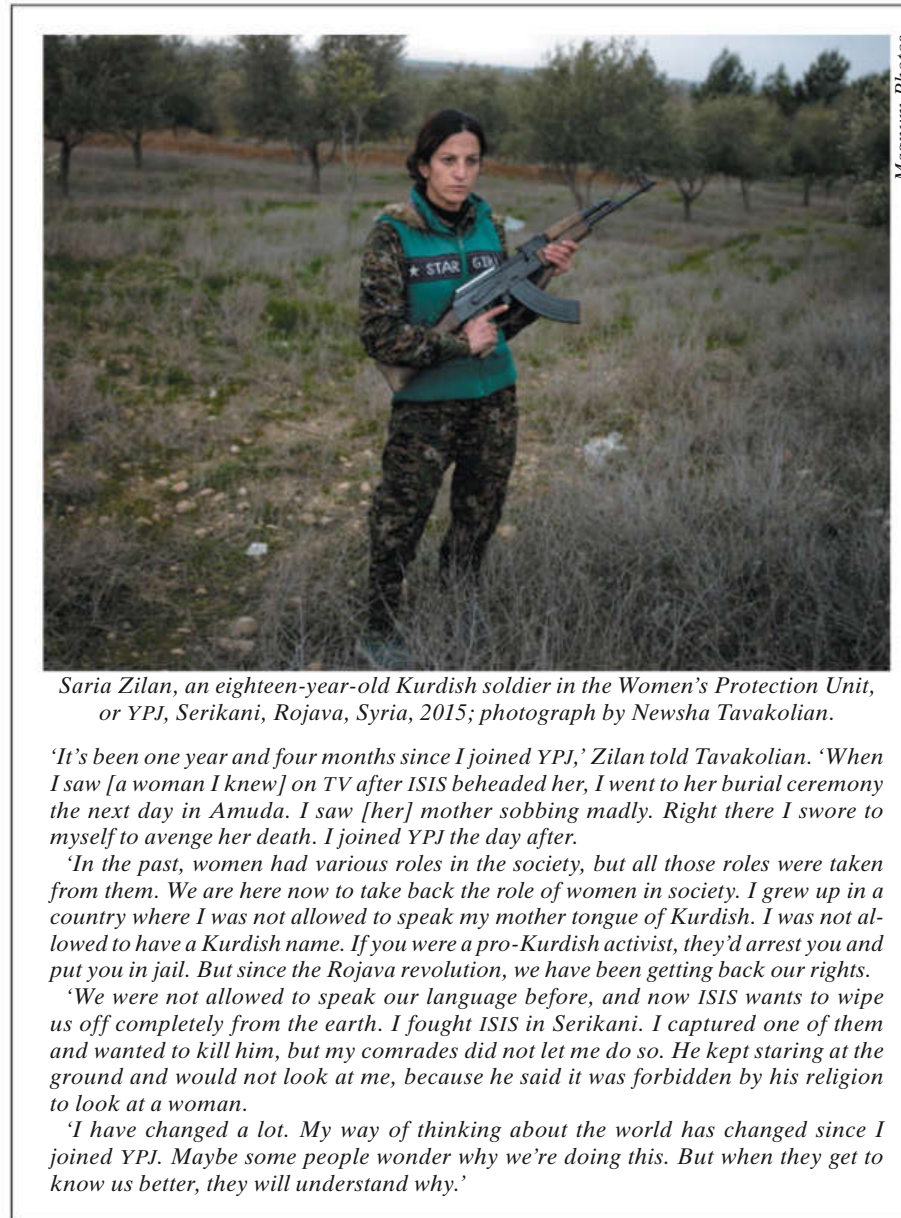
A couple of months later, we observed weapons [being distributed] under the guise of “protecting the demonstrators.” When the violence became predominant, we told our members not to participate.

Within the year, the government’s use of force and the rise of armed groups in the opposition made public protest both impossible and irrelevant. Jihadists took over the rhetoric of the opposition, and democrats had no place on either side of the barricades. The population of Syria hemorrhaged to the four corners of the world.

Europe’s leaders, who had resisted wave after wave of Syrian refugees until a drowned Syrian Kurdish child’s photograph embarrassed them into action in early September, are again speaking of a diplomatic solution that requires the agreement of the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. There has been much shuttling by Syrian oppositionists, Syrian intelligence chiefs, Russian and American diplomats, and Saudi princes. What is happening recalls the so-called “peace process” that has failed to break the Israeli–Palestinian impasse for the past twenty years. A senior Syrian official, who asked me not to publish his name, said, “We are at the threshold of a joint American–Russian effort with the UN to get the Syrian government and opposition into a collective effort against terrorism.”

This is optimistic fantasy, given that the US will not coordinate any of its policies with the Assad regime in order to defeat ISIS. Moreover, neither the US nor Russia has budged from its initial position about Bashar al-Assad. The Russians insist he must stay, and the Americans demand that he go. Although they speak about negotiations, which ISIS gains in Syria and Iraq have made more urgent, they are not negotiating. Instead, they support the combatants’ efforts to kill one another and turn more Syrians into refugees. A prominent Syrian oppositionist in exile told me that he explained to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that, for the opposition to fight against “terrorism” along with the Syrian army, “you would have to restructure the army.” When I said that Assad would refuse to restructure the army, the oppositionist conceded, “Okay. That’s why the war would never end.”

Turkey, which probably has the most local influence in Syria, is using its professed war against ISIS as a smokescreen to attack Kurds, the most effective



Saria Zilan, an eighteen-year-old Kurdish soldier in the Women’s Protection Unit, or YPJ, Serikani, Rojava, Syria, 2015; photograph by Newsha Tavakolian.

‘It’s been one year and four months since I joined YPJ,’ Zilan told Tavakolian. ‘When I saw [a woman I knew] on TV after ISIS beheaded her, I went to her burial ceremony the next day in Amuda. I saw [her] mother sobbing madly. Right there I swore to myself to avenge her death. I joined YPJ the day after.’

‘In the past, women had various roles in the society, but all those roles were taken from them. We are here now to take back the role of women in society. I grew up in a country where I was not allowed to speak my mother tongue of Kurdish. I was not allowed to have a Kurdish name. If you were a pro-Kurdish activist, they’d arrest you and put you in jail. But since the Rojava revolution, we have been getting back our rights.’

‘We were not allowed to speak our language before, and now ISIS wants to wipe us off completely from the earth. I fought ISIS in Serikani. I captured one of them and wanted to kill him, but my comrades did not let me do so. He kept staring at the ground and would not look at me, because he said it was forbidden by his religion to look at a woman.’

‘I have changed a lot. My way of thinking about the world has changed since I joined YPJ. Maybe some people wonder why we’re doing this. But when they get to know us better, they will understand why.’

tells me, expressing a widespread perception in government-held areas. A Sunni shopkeeper in Damascus’s old city pointed to some bearded militiamen at a checkpoint near his front door and complained that Shiites from outside Syria were taking over his neighborhood. This disquiet is not restricted to the Sunnis. “I’m thinking of leaving,” a friend in Damascus told me. “I’m Alawite, and I’m secular, but I don’t like this Islamicization that came with Hezbollah.”

The growth of Iranian influence on the Syrian government pits two theocratic ideologies, the late Ayatollah Khomeini’s *wali al faqih*, or “rule of (Islamic) jurists,” versus the Saudi-inspired Wahhabi fundamentalism of ISIS as well as the Turkish-backed, al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat an-Nusra. This has led many Syrians who don’t subscribe to Sunni or Shiite fundamentalist ideology to welcome Russian military engagement. In recent weeks,

empire outside Anatolia, disgraced themselves for all time by their genocide of the Armenian population, and suffered the indignity of Allied occupation of their capital, Istanbul.

Sultan Mehmed V proclaimed a jihad against the British that most Muslims ignored, just as calls for jihad since 2011 against the Alawite usurper, Bashar al-Assad, failed to rouse the Sunni masses of Syria’s main population centers, Damascus and Aleppo. Assad made his own error from the day when he allowed his security services to fire on unarmed demonstrators in the belief that, as in the past, fear would send them home. They did not go home. They went to war.

Elia Samman, a member of the recently legalized wing of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) that seeks to unite all the states of Greater Syria, participated in the early demonstrations against the regime in 2011. Within a month of the first rallies in



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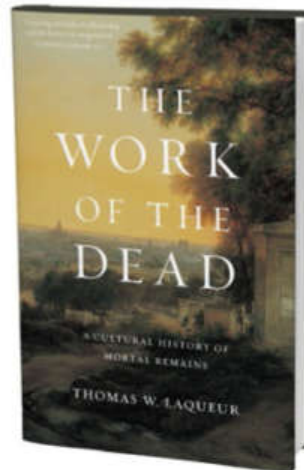
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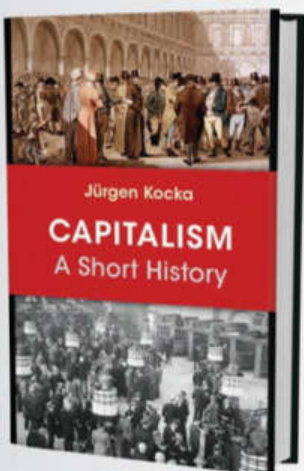
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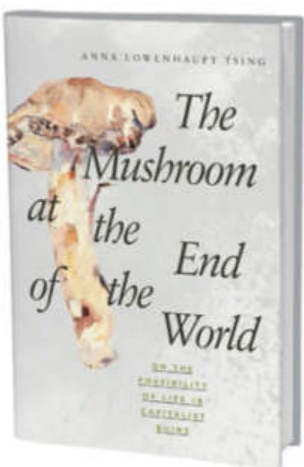
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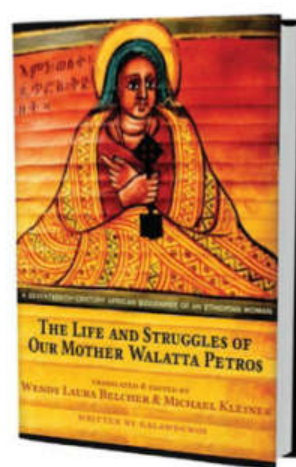
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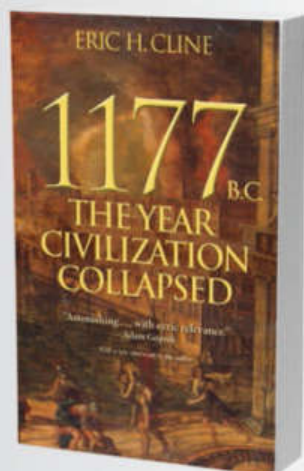
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## 1177 B.C.

The Year Civilization Collapsed

Eric H. Cline

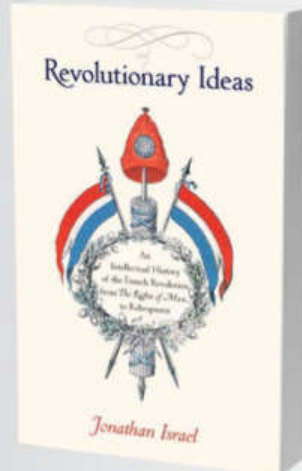
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fighters to date against ISIS in Syria, Iraq, or Turkey itself. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has suddenly thrown his hand in with Assad against the same sort of fundamentalists he overthrew and is imprisoning at home. He and Assad now share what Assad called "a joint vision" on security issues. The Syria war is a free-for-all in which everyone pursues his own interests to the detriment of the Syrians themselves.

At the end of *Seferberlik* in 1918, Britain and France occupied Syria and partitioned it into the statelets that have

failed their populations ever since. No one knows where this war is leading or what today's children will pass on to the next generation. During the conflict of a century ago, the exiled poet Khalil Gibran watched from Boston, and wrote in "Dead Are My People":

*My people and your people, my  
Syrian  
Brother, are dead. . . . What can be  
Done for those who are dying?  
Our  
Lamentations will not satisfy their*

*Hunger, and our tears will not  
quench  
Their thirst; what can we do to save  
Them from between the iron paws  
of  
Hunger?*

The United Nations' latest "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic" paints a depressing portrait of the population's unimaginable torment at the hands of government and opposition forces alike. The regime

drops barrel bombs in Aleppo, and the rebels respond with gas cannisters of explosives and shrapnel. ISIS rapes and brutalizes Yazidi women whom it has declared slaves to be bought and sold. The regime's security services practice torture on an industrial scale. Both sides besiege villages, and both sides commit massacres. The UN report's forty-four pages of horrific war crimes should be sufficient for the outside powers to budge and call a halt to this war. What are they waiting for? □

—September 24, 2015

## England's Great Neglected Artist

Julian Bell

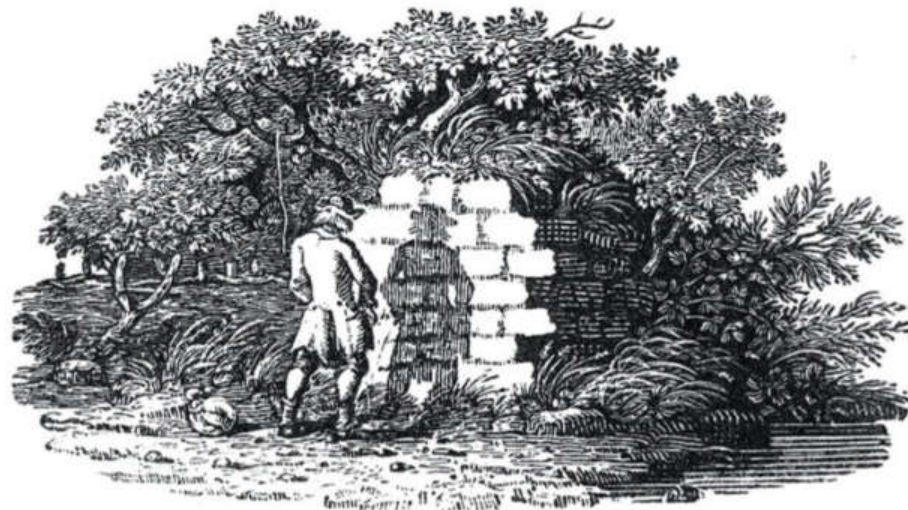
### The Art of Thomas Bewick

by Diana Donald,  
with contributions  
by Paul F. Donald.  
Reaktion, 327 pp., \$65.00

"Thomas Bewick is an inventor, and the first wood-cutter in the world!" John James Audubon, the great recorder of America's birds, saluted his equivalent in Britain in these terms in his journal at the end of a visit to Newcastle upon Tyne in 1827. In other words, Bewick was not simply an engraver of wooden blocks for printing, he was, in 1820s terms, one of the men of the day. This was, as Bewick himself wrote, an "age of mechanical improvement."<sup>1</sup>

Two years earlier, not forty miles from Newcastle, George Stephenson had presented the world with the first public railway. Whether he was to be thanked likewise for the safety lamp that was revolutionizing the coal mines of the region, or whether credit here was due to the charismatic Humphry Davy, was a matter for loud debate. Busts of James Watt and Benjamin Franklin, earlier deliverers of innovation, stood on the mantelpiece of every social optimist. Keeping them company were the inventors of the arts. Audubon, reflecting on "the intrinsic value...to the world" of the seventy-three-year-old Northumberland man he had just met, compared him to Walter Scott, the "learned" and "brilliant" fictionalizer of British history.

Thomas Bewick, however, was for Audubon "a son of Nature." Publishing his surveys of mammals and then of British birds between 1790 and 1804, with hundreds of species pictured in wood engravings of unprecedented precision and vitality, Bewick had offered modern readers an expanded appreciation of the creatures with whom they shared the earth. An equally important factor in his rise to fame were the "tail-pieces" concluding each species entry, tiny and captivating distillations of life in the British countryside. Bewick had been able to "invent"—to come upon, in the verb's original sense—this new wealth of imaginative experience not because he was learned like Scott, but rather because he was singularly well acquainted with the fields, woods, and hills, having



*A 'tail-piece' by Thomas Bewick, from his History of British Birds, 1797*

been brought up on a farmstead ten miles up the Tyne from Newcastle.

We no longer nowadays salute "Nature" with the unhesitating confidence invested in the concept by Audubon or by writers such as William Wordsworth, another of Bewick's numerous admirers. And yet Diana Donald's impressive recent study, *The Art of Thomas Bewick*, demonstrates the surprising resilience of the American visitor's assessment. At the end of her scrupulous inquiry into the political, religious, and cultural circumstances in which Bewick's work was undertaken, the Northumbrian natural historian still stands, however we interpret him, as an innovator rather than an imitator, and as an artist who worked, as much as any artist can, from freshly won experience rather than by cleaving to cultural precedent.

For Audubon to hail Bewick as "the first wood-cutter" was to recognize that he had used wood to deliver effects never realized before. Back in the Renaissance, printmakers in Europe carved away at blocks of pear wood to deliver the long-flowing, calligraphic lines visible, say, in Dürer's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, or in the equally dynamic images of Hans Baldung Grien or Hendrick Goltzius—the craftsmen's knives and chisels working along with the grain of the dense, smooth wood. In early modern art there was no longer a place for such expressive uses of the medium. Oil painting became entrenched as high art, and copperplate engraving presented the surest technique for monochrome reproduction of its effects. So after 1600 the woodblock was relegated to menial service. Since, unlike the copper-

plate, it could be integrated in a single printing with adjacent blocks of text, it supplied the chunky, easy-to-read pictures and heraldic devices that adorned tracts, ballads, children's primers, and the like. Boxwood from Turkey, harder than pear, became the main resource, exported to jobbing print workshops across Europe.

In one of these, three quarters of the way from London to Edinburgh, the young Thomas Bewick took to carving into the end grain of the block, rather than attacking one of its plank faces. It seems to have been the unprompted impulse of a handyman with a uniquely keen eye, one dissatisfied with the quality of line that any more yielding surface could deliver. The development of a novel texture of print was gradual across the decades that followed Bewick's entry into the Newcastle shop of Ralph Beilby as a fourteen-year-old apprentice in 1767. But it was helped by the variety of jobs that Beilby took on—engraving anything from clock faces to dog collars, bank notes to wine goblets—a range of services Bewick would continue to provide to his fellow citizens after he took control of the business thirty years later.

Bewick found that the needle-fine points employed to scratch designs into copper, silver, brass, and glass could be adapted to score the fine-grained boxwood with microscopic precision, and that the resulting "cuts" or printing blocks were resilient enough to deliver a near-endless number of reliable impressions. A technique arose that could outperform the copperplate.

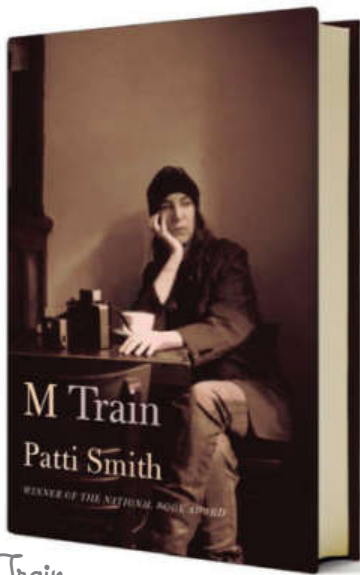
Unlike the eighteenth-century copperplate, however, the new "wood engraving" bore only an indirect relationship to painting. Etchers knew how to work their plates with systems of cross-hatching that simulated the look of modeling in oils. But Old Master canvases played little part in Bewick's provincial formation. Though he journeyed to London at the age of twenty-three, he gladly quit the capital nine months later, preferring to remain in a Newcastle that had, as he told a friend, "fewer admirers of the Arts" than any comparable British city. Instead, he cultivated an ethos of truth to his chosen medium. "I have long been of opinion," he wrote in a memoir addressed to his daughter, "that the cross hatching of wood cuts, for book work, was a waste of time, as every effect can be much easier obtained by plain parallel lines, and that the other way was not the legitimate object of wood engraving," adding that it had been his "ardent desire to see the *stroke* engraving on wood carried to the utmost perfection."

A cut, by definition, separates what was unseparated before; a stroke, by connotation, is a pleasurable action, an unhindered impulse running from shoulder to hand to tool. The new art that Bewick developed was at once a probing of the world and a calligraphy. Among the four-hundred-odd species in his *History of British Birds*, Bewick describes garden warblers. These are small, inconspicuous birds. Although far from rare, they seek cover in foliage and are so elusive that Bewick was able only once, briefly, to observe a shot specimen, without time to supplement his few live sightings by sketching in detail. Despite this, the resulting woodcut is, Diana Donald observes, "one of Bewick's most striking successes.... He captures perfectly the shape, plumage and attitude of this notoriously featureless species."

Bewick did so with tiny ripples of wood-scoring serried on average about twenty to the quarter-inch, responding to the overlap of each feather and often to the fine barbs that run from its quill. At the same time these grooves gently modulate in depth to convey the swell of the shoulders and crown, while they are half scratched through on the breast, this being "dingy white, a little inclining to brown" according to Bewick's accompanying text: among his ambitions for wood engraving was to succeed in suggesting color. Above all,

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Bewick, *My Life*, edited by Iain Bain (London: Folio Society, 1981, p. 181).

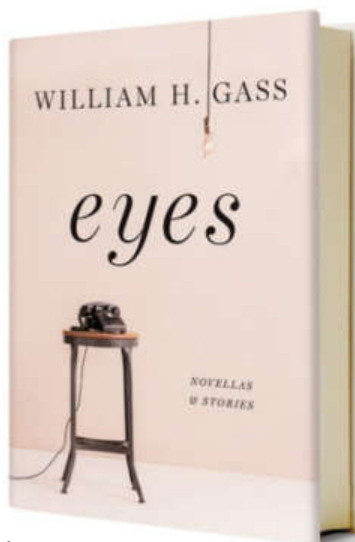




*M Train*

**PATTI SMITH**

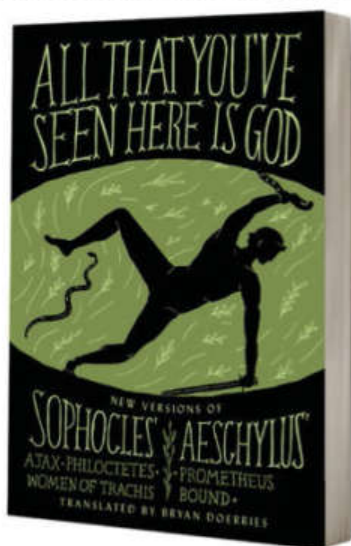
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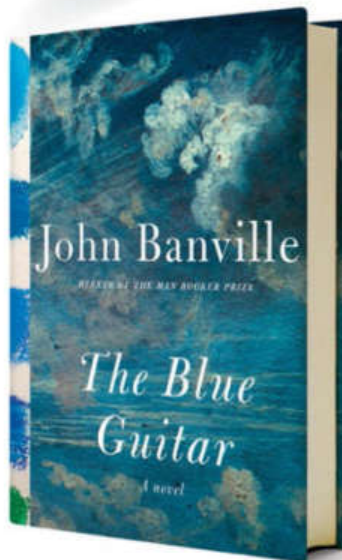
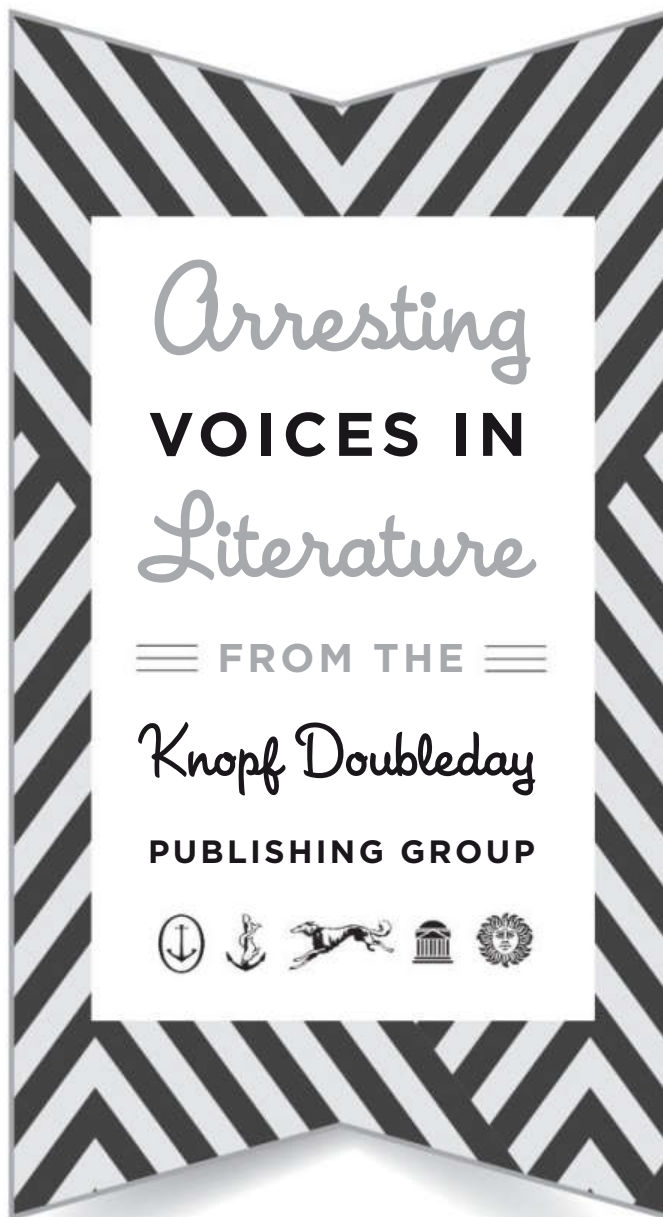


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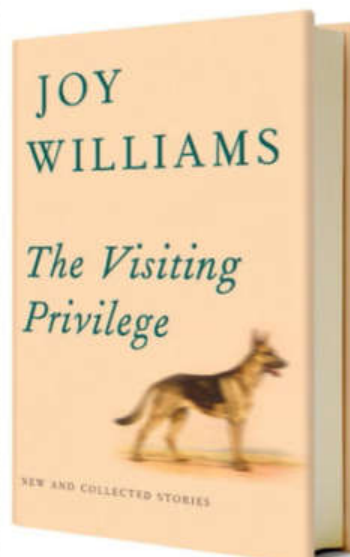


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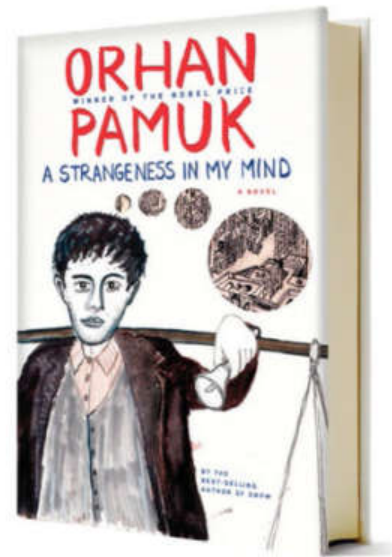


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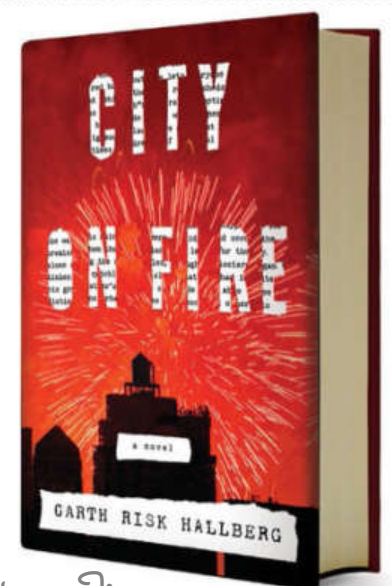
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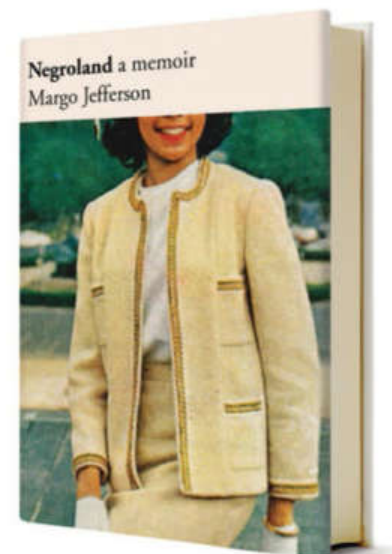


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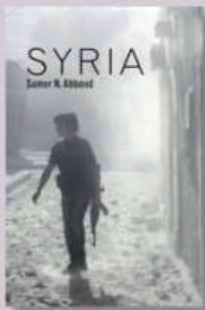


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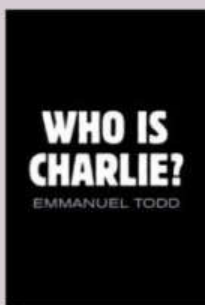
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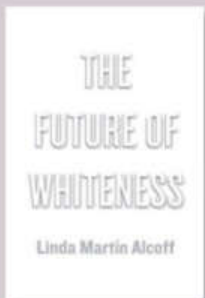
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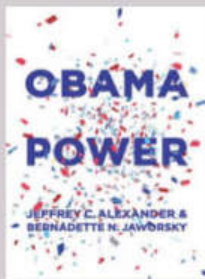
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the cock of the bird's head and a nicked highlight in the eye convey the look of a species that doesn't much like to be looked at. Donald cites a contemporary of Bewick's who remarked that he alone among natural history illustrators could help the observer make out a bird "even at a distance, as sailors say, by 'the cut of his jib'... his *je ne sais quoi*."

In fact, Donald compares this woodcut to a color illustration of the same bird from a handbook published in 1938, by which time artists had photography to assist them, and finds that Bewick's is the more informative. This verdict comes in "A Commentary on Bewick's Representation of Species" that forms an appendix to her text and performs an itemized fact-check. It enhances the reader's respect for Bewick's matchlessly sharp eye, though occasionally Donald—an art historian whose son is an ornithologist—chooses to upbraid him. For example, he "misleadingly" depicts a spoonbill "against a background of rocky coast" when marshes are its habitat: or supposes the aforementioned illustration to represent a "passerine" rather than a "garden" warbler, where modern science recognizes only one species. All this makes for an unusual venture in art studies, a field in which present-day writers are generally more comfortable with allusions to "reality effects" rather than with assessing any correspondence art might have with reality.

And yet though Donald sometimes talks of "realism," that is not exactly the term for Bewick's project. The four jolly spiral squiggles beneath the warbler make an invigorating contrast to its exquisitely rendered plumage, but they hardly come together as a plausible branch for the bird to stand on. In one sense, the surrounding variegation of hacks, streaks, and curling strokes composes into a habitat for the bird: it was one of Bewick's innovations, thus to convey the proper environmental context of a species.

Yet study those marks more closely—for Bewick is constantly inviting you to reach for the magnifying glass—and the habitat resolves itself into a decorative bricolage, devoid of internal spatial logic. That assemblage of marks attaches itself to the specimen much in the way that in heraldry, the "supporters" (lions rampant, for instance) and the "compartment" (the grassy knoll beneath their feet) surround an escutcheon, providing the entire unit for reproduction with a similarly irregular outline. The hierarchy of meanings in a Bewick woodcut and its relation to the paper it sits on surely derive from his experience of transferring designs to vessels, clocks, and the like, rather than from a kinship with framed pictures.

The issue is further complicated, however, by the distinctly painterly trick Bewick engineered of planing down sections of the block so that they would print more faintly—an innovation that, in the case of the warbler image, creates the atmospheric haze distancing the trees seen at top left behind the wattle fence. His project thus cuts across our current categories of high art, of signwork, and of scientific illustration—a conceptual challenge that Donald sets out to confront. Her interpretation points out that Bewick not only had his feet firmly planted in a working knowledge of the country-

side, as the son of a Northumberland tenant farmer. He also lent his vocal powers to the debating clubs of a Newcastle that buzzed with progressive ideas. (Jean-Paul Marat, the subsequent Jacobin journalist, was based in the city during the early 1770s.) Bewick's own politics argued for "the march of intellect" and "the liberties of mankind"—he heroized the American Revolution—while defending the rights of property and taking the experience of "the man of industry, the plain plodding farmer" as the measure of social justice. Enlightenment, therefore, from this distinctive northern English perspective, was not to be sought in abstract philosophic schemes but in solidly grounded improvements and discoveries.



Thomas Bewick; portrait by George Gray, circa 1780

So it was with zoology. Bewick wrote skeptically about the taxonomic theories of so-called "Garret Naturalists" in one of his prefaces to *British Birds*:

Systems have been formed and exploded, and new ones have appeared in their stead; but like skeletons injudiciously put together, they give but an imperfect idea of that order and symmetry to which they are intended to be subservient.

He was content if with his own "outdoor naturalism," based as far as possible on direct observation, he could delineate and label items of evidence in a sequence appealing to everyday instincts—starting with "The Golden Eagle," the most kingly of native species, and carrying on through to "The Least Willow Wren." On some higher plane, "order and symmetry" undoubtedly existed, for Bewick was a reverent deist who sooner saw God's hand in "the great book of Nature" than in the Bible. But "to follow [Nature] into all her recesses would be an endless task," a second preface concludes, gesturing in a mode of sublime reverie toward the migrations of "countless multitudes of birds, wafted, like the clouds, around the globe."

Each entry in the two volumes of the *Birds* begins with a "cut," beneath which capital letters definitively announce the species identity—"THE ROOK," for instance. The effect is somewhat like an old inn sign, with that spirit so distinctive to folk art, of a creature receiving its first naming and proclamation. But then, after a page or two of informative text, there is the pictorial equivalent of a word left indefinite—the untitled engraving Bewick described as

Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne/Bridgeman Images

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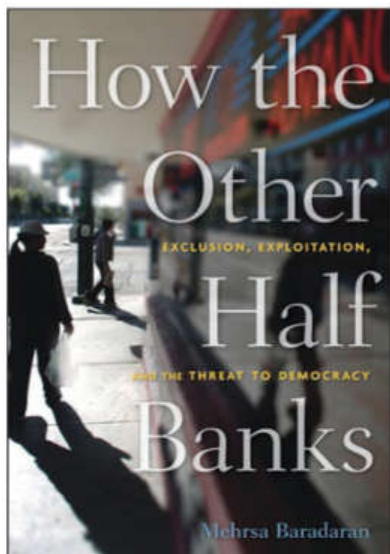
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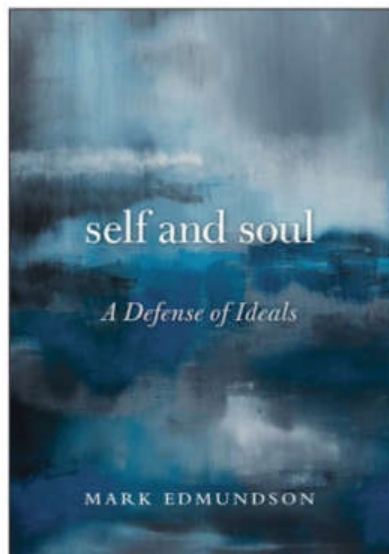
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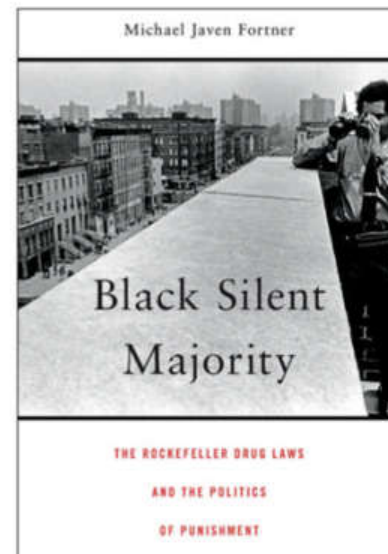
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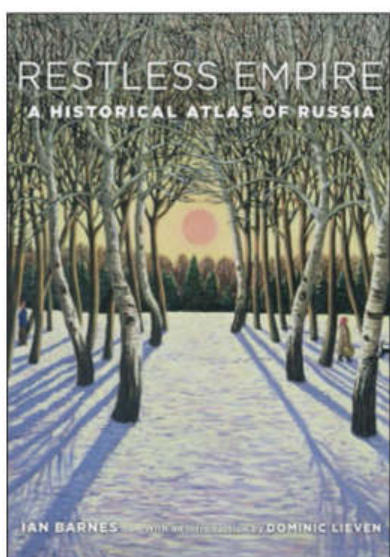
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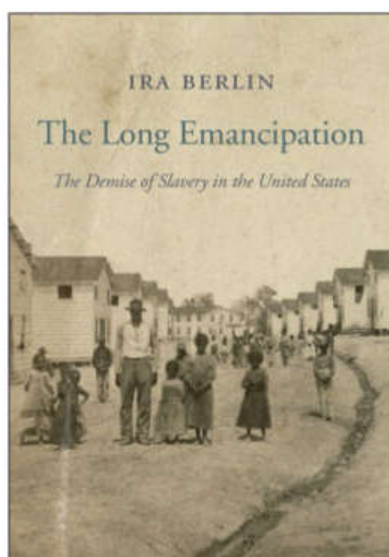
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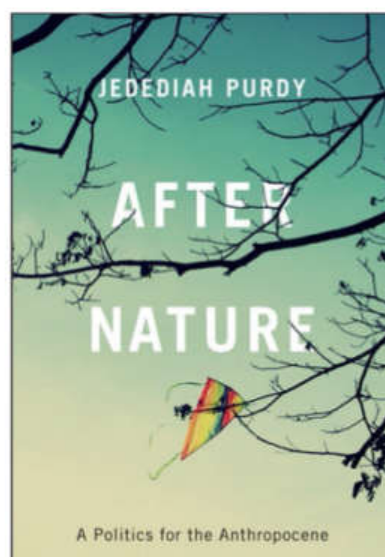
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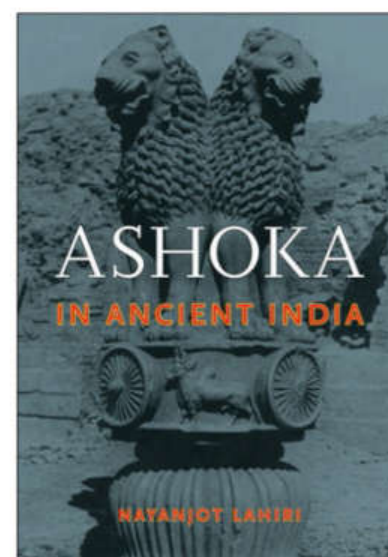
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his "tail-piece." End decorations with freeform borders ("vignettes"), a convention as old as printing, here took on unprecedented potency. Blessed with vigor as well as keen eyes—a year before his death, it was "a tall, stout man" that Audubon met, "full of life" and "active and prompt in his labours"—Bewick poured his surplus energies into unbidden, miniature caprices that played with and half resisted the will to interpret.

Typically, he would haul out from his imagination's stockroom a farmyard, field, or country lane, or maybe a streambank or seashore; or would dream of dwellings and their erection, their inhabitation and eventual ruin; or at last of the cemetery. These scenes might crystallize around busy little characters, most often the "plain plodding" types who were the norm of his social experience. In the vignettes, the "sturdily independent or raffish lives" (as Donald puts it) of these farming folk or children or vagrants intersect with the lives of familiar animals and with the rains, winds, and snows of phlegmatic northern England. For those who came after Bewick, the wealth of late-eighteenth-century rural experience recorded in these exquisite engravings would get suffused with nostalgia. They would become poignant trophies, at once primal and naive: as much as things were being seen for the first time, they were being seen for the last.

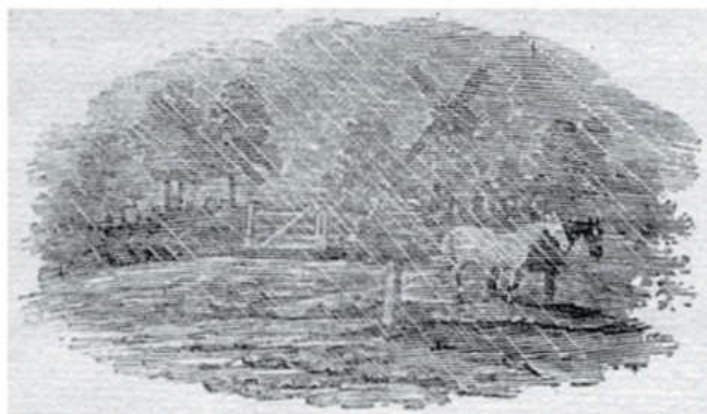
What did the tail-pieces intend, however? They resonate on various levels—not least in fact in their ripostes to sentimentality. Tourists have long visited Northumberland for the sake of Hadrian's Wall, Britain's outstanding relic of Roman occupation. Bewick shows a traveler actively addressing himself to one of the wall's masonry fragments, but to relieve himself and by no means to gawp in awe. The visual proposition is droll and somewhat gross—a great deal of piss, shit, and vomit is scattered through Bewick's imagery—yet even so, it has a lyrical air: the wind rustles the bushes, the sun brightly shines, there is empathy with that averted figure and his simple pleasure of bladder relief. And underlying that, there is surely a foretaste of Shelley's "Ozymandias" and its withering mockery of the pretensions of ancient tyranny. (Elsewhere, Bewick shows a tottering monument inscribed *Splendid victory*, against which a passing donkey scratches his behind.)

There are simple, carefree pleasures—"No artist has ever given a more convincing portrayal of children at play than Bewick," writes Donald—and within the same worldly weave, there is cruelty: the waggoner who whips his overlaid nag, or the crowd circled around an outdoor cockfight, ignoring what God offers them, the perfect rainbow above their heads. Donald, deeply versed in British cultural themes of the two centuries spanned by Bewick's life, points out that compassion to animals was becoming prominent among them, and that on some level these are conscience-stirring pictorial parables.

Indeed, any reading of *My Life*, the memoir Bewick wrote for his daughter, or of *Nature's Engraver*, the engaging

biography that Jenny Uglow brought out in 2006, will confirm that the engraver was plentifully opinionated on all issues, a good citizen and family man superabundant with his own rectitude. Donald also notes the social rebuke implied when, for instance, a beggar is shown licking at scraps outside the walls of a grandee's mansion, upon which a peacock struts. And yet the riposte here is partly an internal affair, counterpointing a "head-piece" three pages earlier, which pictures THE PEACOCK in all his visual extravagance. The tail-pieces are, as Donald acknowledges, "polysemic," and in this sense remain richer in content than their progenitor's conversation.

You can read them as you will: they are gratuitous flights of the imagination. In that, you might say, they are preemi-



A 'tail-piece' by Thomas Bewick, from his *History of British Birds*, 1797

nently aesthetic and thus diametrically contrasted to the species images with their precise descriptive function. But the logical status of each line of production is equally remote from the aesthetics of painting, the dominant "fine art." In 1984, Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner proposed that in a Bewick engraving, in contrast to a framed canvas,

the image, defined from its center rather than its edges, emerges from the paper as an apparition or a fantasy. The uncertainty of contour often makes it impossible to distinguish the edge of the vignette from the paper: the whiteness of the paper, which represents the play of light within the image, changes imperceptibly into the paper of the book, and realizes, in small, the Romantic blurring of art and reality.<sup>2</sup>

Another essay by Tom Lubbock, rerouting the arguments of Rosen and Zerner twenty-five years later, posited that each scene stood in relation to its pictured protagonist as a kind of "thought-bubble." The ruined wall and foliage, for instance, constitute for the halted traveler "the patch of the world illuminated by the narrow beam of his present consciousness." And in this manner, Lubbock concluded, the vignette amounted to "a definition of the mind."<sup>3</sup>

Diana Donald does not try to rival these two provocative attempts to locate Bewick within art theory. She

does however map the extensive impact the engraver had on Victorian culture, above all the resonances his work held for writers ranging from Tennyson and the Brontës to the critic John Ruskin. The last, the most difficult of devotees, sought to explain how such a "vulgar or boorish person" as Bewick could nonetheless represent the quintessence of his nation's art. "To his utterly English mind, the straw of the sty, and its tenantry, were abiding truth.... He could draw a pig, but not an Aphrodite." That empirical temper, claimed Ruskin, allowed for "bitter intensity of... feeling," and he singled out as an example of "highest possible quality," for its "feeling of melancholy," a little tail-piece showing two horses standing in a paddock on a pelting autumn evening.

The two square inches of ink in question have a bearing on the arguments advanced by Lubbock, who speaks of images that lie raggedly on the page "like a smudge or a spillage." This particular scene has been reduced to an almost homogenous state of twilight by close-packed horizontal grooves, and then further scratched through by diagonal slashing representing the dismal English rain. And it is much as those recent essays claim: the image pitches you into the range of awareness experienced by the sorry, long-suffering beasts; you are seduced into empathy; it seems that you are there, and that there is

nowhere else to be. And yet this ink upon the paper is so very nearly a mere blemish and accident. It is a nameless whim and it need not have been at all. All that redoubles the melancholy. It seems that a disconnected, arbitrary proposition in a big blankness is as much as can be ventured. The picture opens up a mental world, and yet it can be seen as no more and no less than the big black thumbprint that from time to time intrudes on the vignettes, Bewick's own mark canceling out Bewick's own scene-creation.

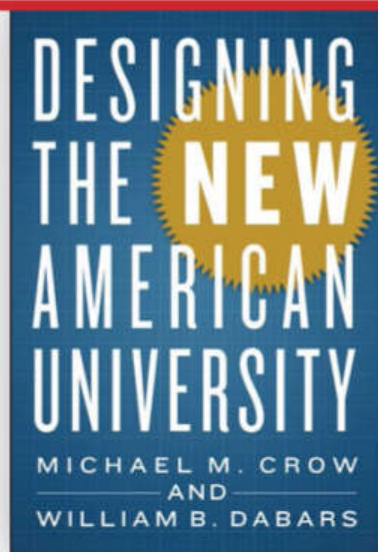
Bewick as countryman was phlegmatic about art. Nature would always exceed us, at once grander and harsher than we could hope to represent: the rain would outlast the roofs built against it; just down the road, the graveyard would always be waiting. Bewick as citizen subscribed to the ethos of improvement. He bequeathed his successors what would become one of the leading print techniques of the nineteenth century, along with an enhanced database of zoological information: and although he seldom pictured them, he seems to have had no quarrel with the pitheads and tall chimneys sprouting up along the Tyne.

The environmental agonies that we associate with the Industrial Revolution were not exactly his, though they would follow soon after. Soon enough, also, the new zoological systematizers, the Darwinians, would supersede the "natural theology" that underpinned Bewick's database. The "cuts," therefore, got distanced from the settings that gave rise to them, settings Donald has now reexplained: but then, the country they contained had always seemed to reveal itself as if through a telescope. For his viewers peering in, it was rather as Auden wrote of Edward Lear: Bewick "became a land." □

<sup>2</sup>"The Romantic Vignette and Thomas Bewick," in *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 81–84.

<sup>3</sup>"Defining the Vignette," in *English Graphic* (Frances Lincoln, 2012), p. 137.





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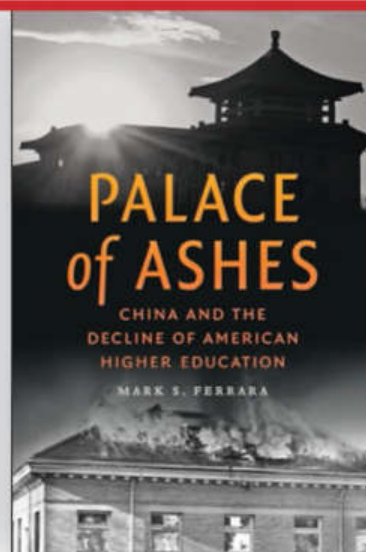
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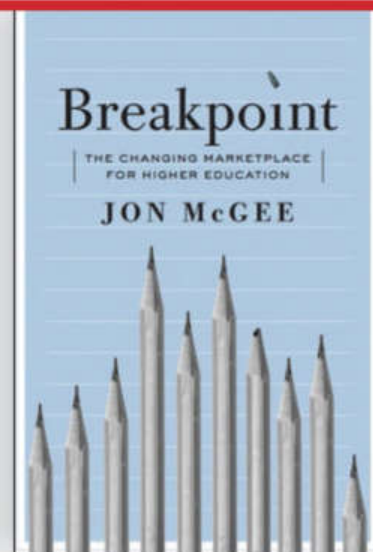
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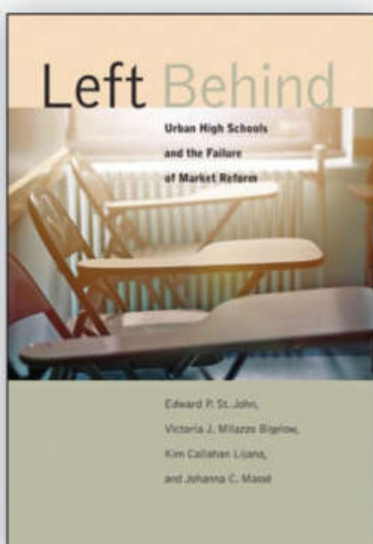
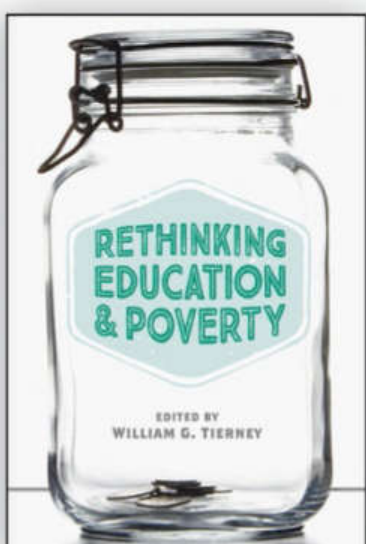
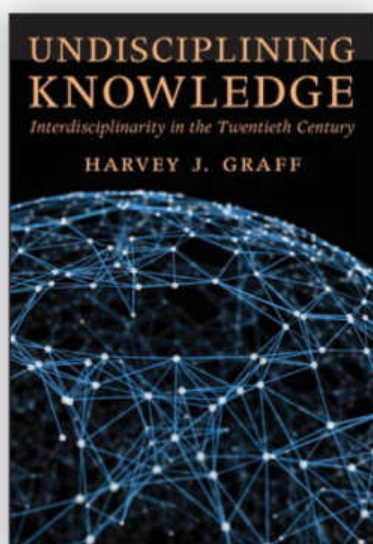
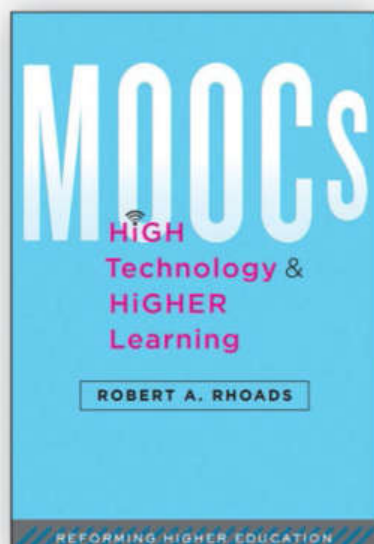
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It is not quite clear when Europeans woke up to the largest movement of refugees on their soil since the upheavals of World War II, but Sunday, August 16, may have been a decisive turning point. In a television interview that day, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, returning from her summer vacation, said that the European Union's single greatest challenge was no longer the Greek debt crisis. It was the wave after wave of Syrians and others now trying to enter Europe's eastern and southern borders. It is "the next major European project," she said. It "will preoccupy Europe much, much more than...the stability of the euro."

In the capitals of Western Europe, Merkel's words seemed to come as a surprise. And yet across a long corridor of countries, from the Anatolian coast to Greece on up to Hungary and Austria, for anyone who cared to notice there were Syrians waiting to pay human smugglers in back alleys of Turkish beach towns. They were clinging, in the darkness, to hopelessly unseaworthy dinghies in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas; crouching in groups, thirsty and sunbaked, in trash-strewn holding areas on the Greek island of Kos; clamoring to get on rusty trains in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; trudging, in irregular lines, with young children on their shoulders, through the forests of the Serbian-Hungarian border. They were emptying their last savings so they could again pay smugglers to be stuffed into the backs of trucks for a harrowing journey further north to Vienna or even to Munich.

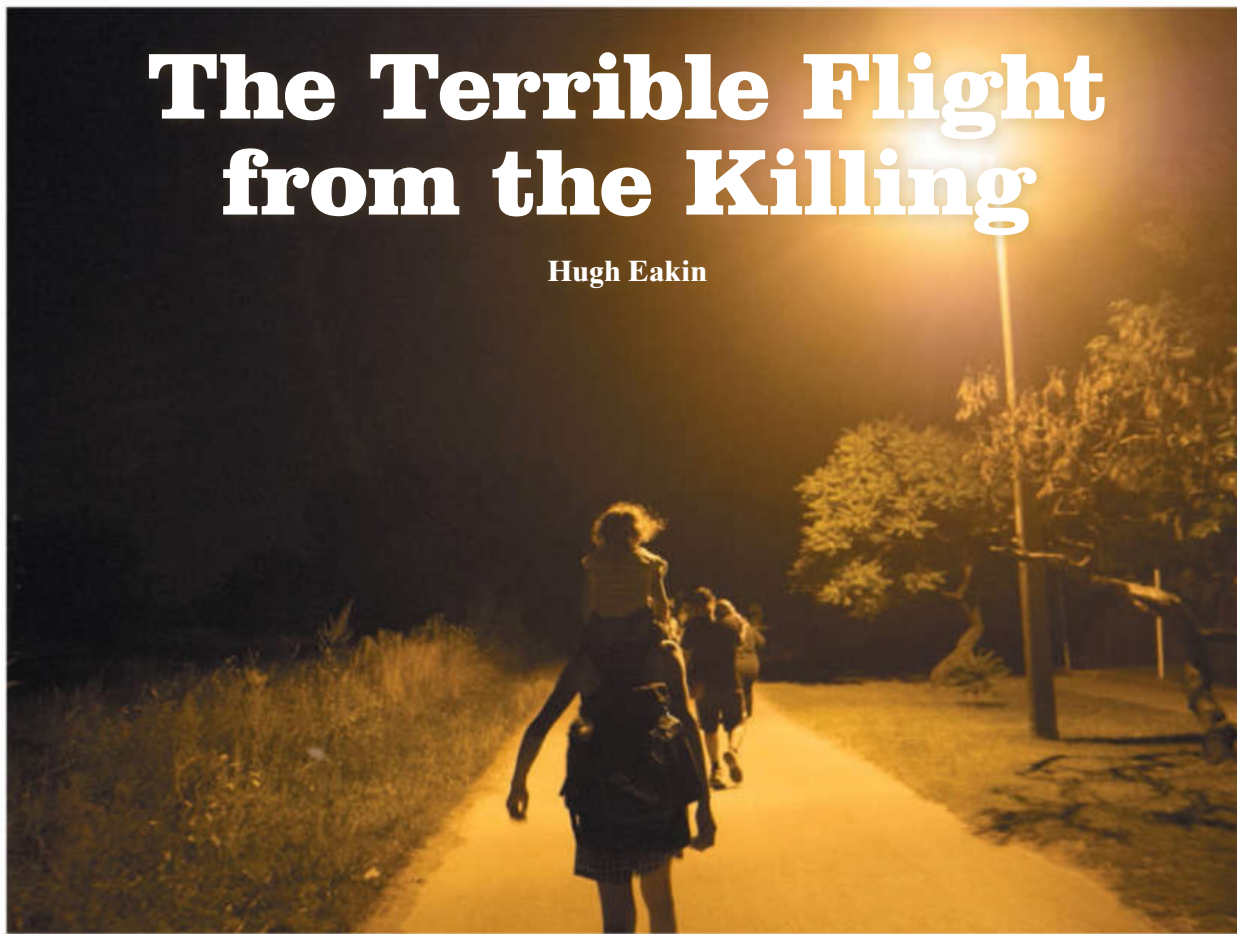
In fact, the new wave had already begun in late spring, when hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans began crossing from Turkey to Greece and continuing, as best they could, into Central Europe. Though it was little noted at the time, by July, well over a thousand people were arriving every day in the Greek islands closest to Turkey, which were woefully ill-equipped to receive them.

International aid workers said that some holding areas had now become the most squalid in the world. At Kara Tepe, a makeshift reception center on the island of Lesbos, the International Rescue Committee, an emergency aid group working in forty countries, reported that there were just two showers for two thousand refugees; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) described conditions as "shameful."

Three days after Merkel's comments, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière revealed that more than three quarters of a million Syrians and others were now expected to seek asylum in Germany alone this year—a four-fold increase from 2014. (The figure has since been revised to one million.) "It will be the largest influx in the coun-

# The Terrible Flight from the Killing

Hugh Eakin



Syrian families in Horgos, Serbia, walking toward the Hungarian border, August 2015

try's postwar history," de Maizière said. Nor was this a temporary situation, he said. With a record 60 million people currently uprooted by war and instability around the world—many of them on Europe's perimeter in the Middle East and Africa—this level of flow was likely to continue for years to come.

In the days and weeks since Merkel's comments and de Maizière's press conference, Europe has been transfixed by a problem so vast and so politically charged that it seems to have exposed all the fault lines of the European project. For years, the European Union has struggled to create a uniform system for dealing with people who arrive on its shores seeking a safe haven. Formally, such people are not "refugees" but rather "asylum seekers" who must apply for asylum after arriving in Europe.

According to a flimsy system known as the "Dublin rules," after the 1990 Dublin Convention on asylum, you are supposed to apply for protection in the first EU country you enter. In practice, because there is free internal movement in the EU and no mandated sharing of responsibilities among member states, these rules are unenforceable.

The poorer Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, where asylum seekers enter the continent, tend to provide as little help as possible and look the other way as the newcomers head further north. Their counterparts in Central and Northern Europe adopt ever more restrictive asylum policies. As a result, the burden has fallen on the very few countries that have been willing to take in large numbers of refugees. In 2014, nearly half of all asylum seekers in the twenty-eight EU countries applied for asylum in Germany and Sweden. This was the situation that this summer's influx brought precipitously to a breaking point.

Even as Germany said it would continue to open its doors wide, its wealthy neighbor Denmark cut benefits to refugees in half and took out English- and Arab-language ads in newspapers

in Lebanon—where there are more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees—telling prospective asylum seekers not to come. Even as Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven said, "My Europe takes in refugees. My Europe doesn't build walls," Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said his government was completing just such a wall, a 110-mile razor-wire fence designed to keep out refugees trying to cross the border from Serbia. And while the French government has announced that it would take in 24,000 of those now seeking refuge in Europe to ease the burden of its neighbors, the British government has refused to do likewise, maintaining that any accommodation of asylum seekers would only encourage more to come. (Britain has instead pledged to take in 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years that it will select directly from the Middle East.)

Among European politicians and the media, there has been a perplexing confusion about who the newcomers are. Chancellor Merkel has unambiguously described them as "refugees" (*Flüchtlinge*), a usage adopted by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker that clearly befits the UN refugee agency's finding that more than 90 percent of the current wave come from Syria and other refugee-producing countries. Yet other European leaders have referred to them as "migrants," or even "illegal migrants," a wording that obscures entirely the horrors of war they are trying to escape. For its part, the international press has offered little clarity, with the BBC, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times* mostly opting for "migrants," and the *Financial Times* using "refugees" and "migrants" interchangeably; *The Guardian* is one of the few major news organizations to refer consistently to a "refugee crisis."

Countries in Eastern Europe, especially, have portrayed the influx as a security threat. In the Czech Republic, police have been taking refugees off trains, detaining them, and even, in one case, writing numbers on their arms; in

Slovakia, the government has said it would accept only Christian refugees, warning of the dangers posed by "people from the Arab world." In both Hungary and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which is not a member of the EU but on the main land route to Serbia and Hungary, police have fired tear gas at Syrians trying to cross their frontier. In a speech to the House of Commons on September 7, British Prime Minister David Cameron introduced a further element. Speaking of "the migration crisis" amid a discussion of national security, he referred to "Islamist extremist violence."

Across the continent, strong humanitarian impulses have competed with growing fears about the absorption of large numbers of Muslims. At train stations and public parks, citizens and municipalities have spontane-

ously offered food, water, clothes, and shelter; in Scandinavia in late August, I met activists who, dismayed at their own governments' response, were organizing a kind of underground railway to help refugees get from one country to another—even if it meant breaking the law. And yet anti-immigrant parties have also gained record strength in Sweden and France. Asylum centers have been targeted by arsonists in Germany; and numerous politicians, from Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary to Denmark and the Netherlands, express misgivings about what Dutch populist Geert Wilders, speaking in his national parliament in early September, called an "Islamic invasion."

The movement to Europe should not have come as a surprise. According to the UN, in 2014 a record 14 million people were newly forced from their homes in armed conflicts worldwide, and much of the staggering increase was owing to the wars in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, more than half of the total pre-war population of 22 million was now uprooted. With the ravages of barrel-bombing by the Assad regime, the terror of the Islamic State, and the growing inability of the international community to deliver aid inside the country, more Syrians than ever before sought refuge abroad.

In the first four months of 2015 alone, another 700,000 fled, many to nearby countries, the highest rate of any time during the war. Meanwhile, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, already overwhelmed with millions of Syrians, have been restricting entry, while the underfunded World Food Program has been drastically reducing food aid. Other recent developments, though less noticed, had far-reaching effects of their own. Several countries in Africa, including Libya, and also many parts of Afghanistan, traditionally the world's number one producer of refugees, have become increasingly unstable and violent in the months since international forces withdrew from Afghanistan in





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2014. At the same time, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, which had together absorbed more than five million Afghans in recent years, had begun taking aggressive steps to send them home or prevent them from staying; by this summer, tens of thousands of Afghans were joining the Syrians trying to enter Europe.

For the refugees themselves, the journey to Europe—requiring a series of up-front payments to smugglers of human beings, often amounting to several thousand dollars—is enormously costly and fraught with danger. More than 2,800 people have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2015 alone. Others have fallen sick or died in encampments in Greece or in the backs of trucks in Central Europe.

On August 27, Austrian police found an abandoned Volvo refrigeration truck packed with the bodies of seventy-one refugees who had paid smugglers to drive them from Hungary to Austria but had suffocated en route; a day later, Austrian police stopped another smuggler's truck containing twenty-six refugees, including three children who had to be hospitalized for severe dehydration. And yet, every day, thousands more have set out from Turkey for the Greek islands, including the young Syrian boy Aylan, whose lifeless body washed up on shore in Turkey after a failed crossing on September 2, shocking the world.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused Europe of turning the Mediterranean into a giant cemetery; Andreas Kamm, the longtime director of the Danish Refugee Council, said that, without major changes, Europe's incoherent response was headed toward "Armageddon." For her part, Chancellor Merkel said that, unless other member states were prepared to step up and share the burden, the very basis of the EU and its Schengen system of open internal borders would be at risk of collapse.

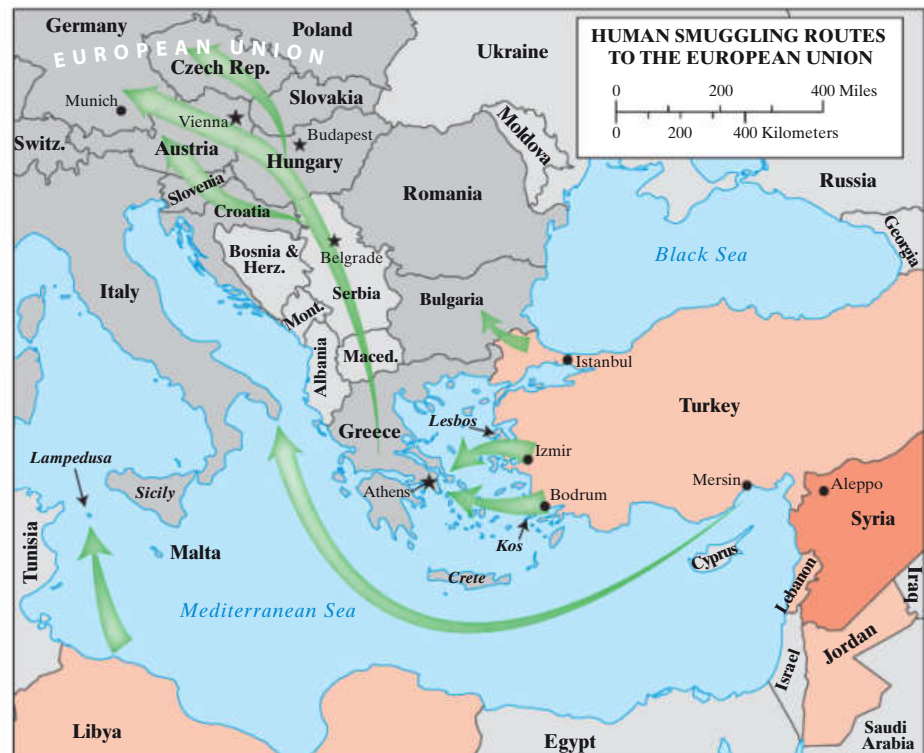
On September 9, EU President Juncker asked member states to adopt a bold plan to distribute 120,000 of the new arrivals as well as 40,000 that had arrived earlier in the year equitably among each of them. This would by no means address the overall numbers arriving, but it would set an important precedent for collective responsibility. By this point, however, the extraordinary numbers of refugees crossing into Bavaria were already moving events in an alarming new direction. Unable to cope, Germany imposed temporary emergency border controls on its Austrian frontier. This radical step, effectively suspending the Schengen system, precipitated similar moves by Austria and Slovakia—and then by Slovenia and Croatia, which had suddenly become alternate routes into the EU. Hungary, meanwhile, which sealed its border with Serbia on September 15, was firing tear gas, water cannons, and pepper spray at refugees, and arresting those who made it across.

With thousands of people now massed on the EU's borders, and with fall rains and colder weather approaching, the closures threatened to create a new humanitarian crisis of their own; the UN Refugee Agency accused Hungary of violating the basic protections set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention. Above all was the deplorable situation of Greek islands like Lesbos, where there were now 20,000 or more

refugees, many lacking any form of shelter.

On September 22, against strenuous opposition from Eastern European countries, the EU adopted mandatory quotas for relocating 120,000 refugees now in Italy, Greece, and Hungary. But at an emergency summit the following day, EU heads of state were mainly focused on ways of controlling EU borders.

Why, given the manifestly urgent needs of those now arriving, did European leaders seem so ambivalent about helping them? And why was the political response so closely tied to border security and strong-armed police tactics?



## 2.

### *Is It Illegal to Be a Refugee?*

At the heart of the current crisis is a fundamental problem: there are virtually no legal ways for a refugee to travel to Europe. You can only apply for asylum once you arrive in a European country, and since the EU imposes strict visa requirements on most non-EU nationals, and since it is often impossible to get a European visa in a Middle Eastern or African country torn apart by war, the rules virtually require those seeking protection to take a clandestine journey, which for most would be impossible without recourse to smugglers. This situation has led to a vast, shadowy human-smuggling industry, based in Turkey, the Balkans, and North Africa, which European officials have recently estimated to be worth as much as \$1 billion per year.

Just months before the current refugee crisis erupted this summer, European leaders launched a "war on smugglers," a controversial plan to crack down on criminal networks in Libya that control what European officials call the "Central Mediterranean" migration route. As Libya descended into growing instability and violence following the 2011 revolution, it became a haven for human smugglers, who specialize in ferrying asylum seekers to Lampedusa, off the coast of Sicily. The smugglers are paid upfront and do not themselves navigate the boats; they have every incentive to put as many people as they can onto small, wooden crafts, leaving it to Italian and European naval forces to rescue them when they founder. (According to European

security experts, the smugglers offer a "menu" of different levels of service for these terrifying journeys, charging more if you want to have a lifejacket, or to sit near the center of the boat, where you are less likely to wash overboard.)

This is not a new phenomenon: the Missing Migrants Project, a database run by the International Organization of Migration in Switzerland, has recorded more than 22,000 migrant deaths in the Mediterranean since the year 2000. But over the past eighteen months, as demand has gone up and smugglers have grown more reckless, the number of fatalities has increased dramatically, with more than five thou-

sand deaths since the beginning of 2014. This year, in the month of April alone, a record 1,200 people are believed to have drowned off the coast of Libya. "How many more deaths will it take for us to call these guys [i.e., the smugglers] mass murderers?" a migration official for a Northern European government told me. In late September, the UN Security Council was to vote on a draft resolution authorizing European forces to seize and even destroy smugglers' boats off the coast of Libya.

"It was a mess," the migration official said. "Here we were trying to deal with smugglers and migrants, and suddenly you had this huge batch of legitimate refugees in Greece." In fact, a great many of the people on the Libyan boats were also refugees, fleeing conflicts in Eritrea, Sudan, Libya, and elsewhere. But the situation was generally portrayed as a "migrant boat" problem, and in late April the European Council announced a plan for "fighting traffickers." (In fact, human trafficking is the coercive transfer of people for slavery, forced labor, or exploitation, and there is no evidence that asylum seekers are being brought to Europe against their will.)

The Syrians arriving in Europe in recent weeks have been equally dependent on smuggling networks. In the past, the "Western Balkans" migration route, which since 2008 has been the second most common path to Europe after the Central Mediterranean route, often involved crossing Turkey's land border with Bulgaria. In 2014, however, the Bulgarian government started building a border fence to keep out

growing flows of asylum seekers, and smugglers shifted their attention to sea routes across the Aegean.

In immigrant neighborhoods of Istanbul, and in the backstreets of the resort towns of Izmir and Bodrum, smuggling outfits have been using Syrians and other Arab speakers to promote crossings in inflatable rubber dinghies to one of the Greek islands only a few miles off the Turkish coast. For €1,000 or more, you can buy a spot in a dingy with as many as seventy other people to try to reach Kos or Lesbos; if you make it, you must then join the thousands of Syrians and others vying to get on one of the large car ferries Greek officials have occasionally used to ship refugees from the islands to the Greek mainland. Until the recent border closures, you could then, by paying smugglers, continue through Macedonia and Serbia to Hungary. According to Frontex, the European border control agency, in the second quarter of 2015, the number of people entering Europe this way had risen more than 800 percent since last year.

In a recent investigation, *Der Spiegel* reported that the smuggling organizations in Turkey tend to be run by Turks and Kurds and often employ "dozens of recruiters, financiers, drivers and guards" of various nationalities. In the Balkans, major smuggling rings have been observed working from a hotel near the train station in Belgrade and from bases in Budapest; many of the drivers, who can earn up to several thousand euros a day, are believed to be Bulgarians. (Three of the five suspects in the deaths of the seventy-one refugees in the truck in Austria were Bulgarian nationals, including one with a Lebanese background; a fourth, who is believed to have been the ringleader, was an Afghan with a Hungarian residency permit.)

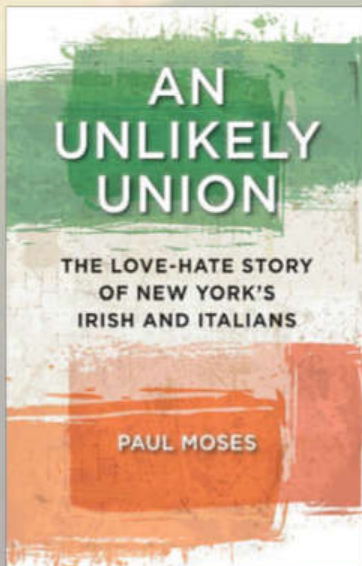
Syrians carry lists of smugglers' phone numbers for use at every stage of the journey; with so much demand, prices have risen rapidly. Earlier in the summer, *Der Spiegel* reported, the 125-mile trip from Belgrade to the Hungarian border could be arranged for €300; by the beginning of September, it had risen to €1,500.

Already anticipating the recent closure of the Hungarian border, smugglers have long been exploring alternative ways to reach Northern Europe. According to the German newspaper *Die Welt*, one of the pioneers of a bold new strategy is a thirty-five-year-old Syrian smuggler based in Mersin, on the southern Turkish coast near the Syrian border. Last winter, working with two business partners and a staff of fifteen, he began using large container ships to send hundreds of refugees at a time from Mersin all the way to Puglia on the east coast of Italy. In its Annual Risk Report this year, Frontex describes this innovation as a "multi-million-euro business" that is "likely to be replicated in other departure countries":

The cargo ships, which are often bought as scrap, tend to cost between EUR 150,000 and 400,000. There are often as many as 200–800 migrants on board, each paying EUR 4,500–6,000 for the trip, either in cash a few days before the departure or by Hawala payment after reaching the Italian coast. The cost is high because the *modus operandi* is viewed as being



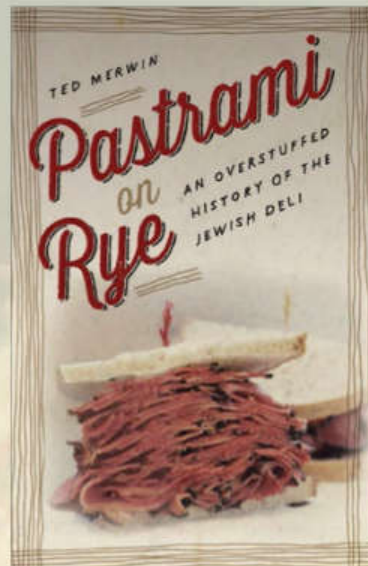
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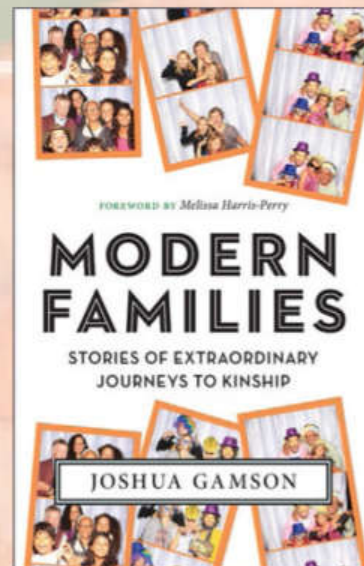
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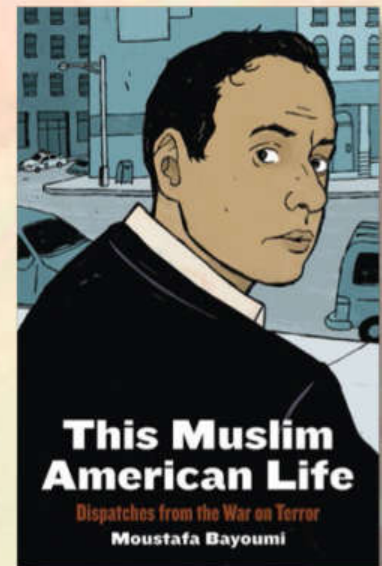
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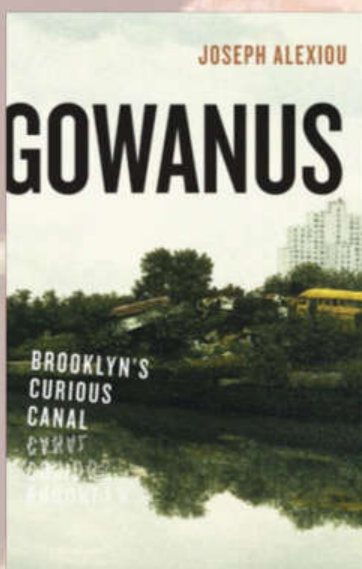
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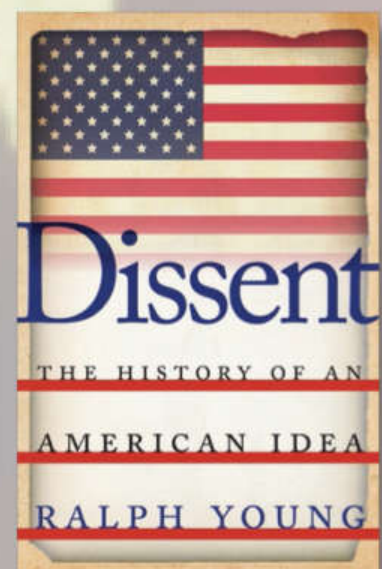
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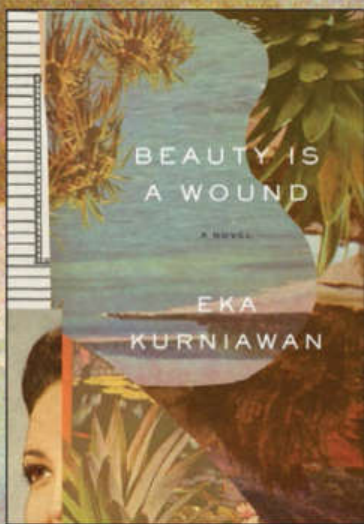
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safe and has been demonstrated as being successful. Hence, the gross income for a single journey can be as high as EUR 2.5 or even 4 million depending on the size of the vessel and the number of migrants on board. In some cases, the profit is likely to be between EUR 1.5 and 3 million....

A tragic aspect of the burgeoning industry is the extent to which it has seemed to taint the refugees themselves. Part of British Prime Minister David Cameron's rationale for refusing to take part in a European plan to redistribute asylum seekers, for example, was that the new arrivals were associated with a seamy underworld. Elizabeth Collett, the European director of the Migration Policy Institute in Brussels, told me, "The British were saying, 'We don't want to reward people who we believe have taken matters into their own hands'" by getting smuggled into Europe.

In fact, because of the costs involved, the bar to setting out to Europe is already high, and many of the Syrians I have met are well-educated doctors, engineers, and urban professionals who no longer see any future in Syria or the surrounding region. For these Syrians, the continual dance between exploitative smugglers and hostile European authorities has often seemed baffling. Here is the account of one thirty-four-year-old Syrian man who recently made the crossing to Lesbos and was interviewed by the International Rescue Committee:

The journey costs \$1,125 [USD]. You pay the money to a broker in Izmir. You give him the money and they give you a secret number. You give this number to the smuggler when you reach the boat, so they can collect the money....

I saw the boat was a dinghy. It only seated 40 people but there were 54 of us. The smugglers had lied. They only want to get your money. They don't care if you die.

We travelled on the sea for an hour. We then came across another boat. We didn't realise it was the police. We were told by friends not to stop because they will take you back to Turkey. We don't know the Greek language. We can't understand what they are saying. They were saying stop the boat.

We held the children and we shouted at the police, "We have children!" ...The boat was punctured and we fell in the water. I was in the sea for 45 minutes before they pulled me out....

They helped us ashore. But why are they doing it this way? Don't help us the hard way. Help us the easy way.

### 3.

#### *A Worldwide Conflict*

Rather than treating Syrians as a security threat or a humanitarian "burden," some economists, including Bundesbank President Jens Weidmann and the French scholar Thomas Piketty, argue that Europe should simply put them to work. Germany in particular, with the lowest birthrate in the EU, desperately needs workers. In 2014 it launched a

program to put migrants and refugees directly into the labor market and German officials hope that the incoming Syrians will quickly find jobs. But David Miliband, the former foreign secretary of Great Britain and the current head of the International Rescue Committee, told me that this approach may be a hard sell in other European countries. "There is certainly not a demographic time bomb [i.e., a threat of dwindling workforce] in the UK," he said, noting that many Eastern European workers came to Britain in the mid-2000s.

Elizabeth Collett, the migration expert, suggested that the economic calculation is a crucial part of Europe's refugee dilemma. "One of the questions we've yet to answer is what is the goal of the asylum process: Is it about giving people an opportunity to a new

No amount of resettlement, however, will mitigate the continued failure of the United States and its European allies to address the refugee crisis at its source. Already in 2013, Syria had produced the largest humanitarian catastrophe of our time. One third of its population had been chased from their homes; as many as half of those taking flight were children. And yet as the war became even more violent, the international community largely turned its back on them. In 2013, 71 percent of the amount needed for humanitarian aid for Syrians was raised; in 2014, the figure fell to 57 percent; this year, it stands at just 37 percent. According to the UN, as many as five million people are now stuck in "hard to reach areas" of Syria and not getting any aid at all.

The refugees now fleeing to Europe,



*A van filled with Syrians stopped by German police on the Austrian border after Germany reimposed border controls, September 2015*

start in life? Or is it about offering temporary protection during a crisis?"

UN officials and international aid groups say that the EU may have to end the disastrous Dublin rule requiring refugees to apply for asylum in the "country of first entry" and change its visa policies if it is to begin to provide a safe, legal way in for those fleeing war. It will also have to work more closely with the UN refugee agency itself, which has long sought to send refugees most in need directly to Western countries. Though it is a big, lumbering bureaucracy, the UNHCR has already registered more than four million Syrian refugees in the Middle East since 2011; if European nations were to start accepting large numbers of them, fewer Syrians might be tempted to pay smugglers to cross the Aegean. Until now, only a few European countries have been accepting UNHCR refugees, and the process can take years.

For its part, the United States has belatedly said it would take in more Syrians, raising its pledge to 10,000 UN-designated refugees. On September 20, Secretary of State John Kerry said the US would also raise the overall annual cap on the number of refugees it accepts from all countries from 70,000 to 100,000 by 2017. But many, including Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, say the US should be taking in 100,000 Syrians alone; as of September, only about 1,500 had been admitted.

David Miliband, who calls the American contribution "paltry," said, "How is it that the US has gone from being the world's leader on this to being outflanked eight-hundred-fold by the Germans?"

Pope Francis recently said, are the "tip of the iceberg." A report released by the UNHCR in June suggests he is right. Called *World at War*, it documents what António Guterres, the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, describes as "an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before."

For much of the decade before 2011, global figures for displaced people were relatively stable; between 2011 and 2014, they rose 40 percent. 2014 was the highest annual increase on record; 2015 may be even higher. Behind this are a record number of simultaneous civil wars—from Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, and Afghanistan to South Sudan, Yemen, Ukraine, Central African Republic, and Somalia—many of them now continuing for a decade or more.

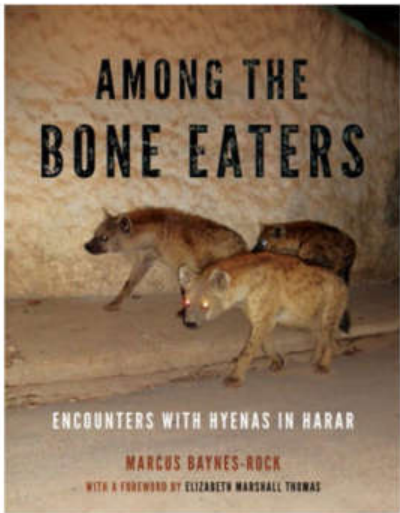
Andreas Kamm, the director of the Danish Refugee Council, told me that we are witnessing a "worldwide conflict" in which the main victims are civilians who are no longer able to escape:

For Europe the numbers are not that high. If we had leaders who could work together and say, we will do things better, we can manage it—one million refugees is only 0.2 percent of the European population. But if we do nothing, people will say, it's out of control. And then it is [out of control]. That's what scares me.

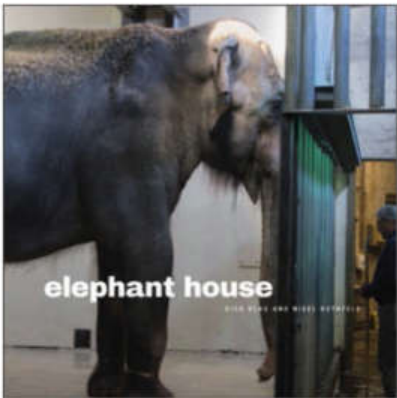
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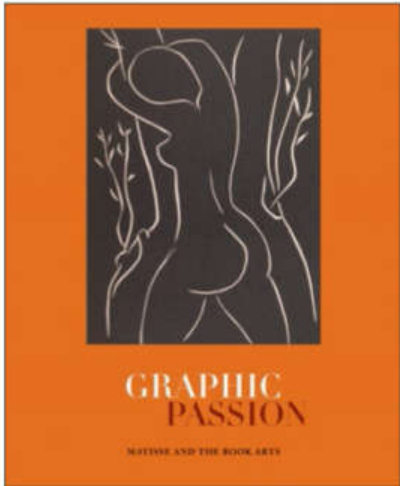
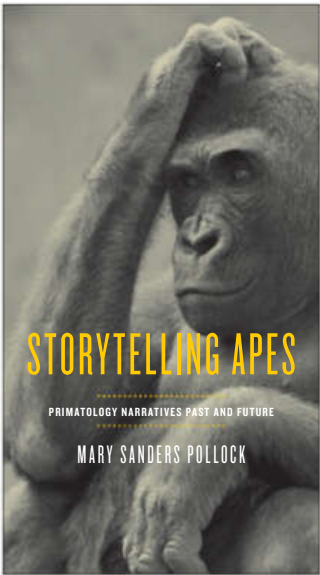


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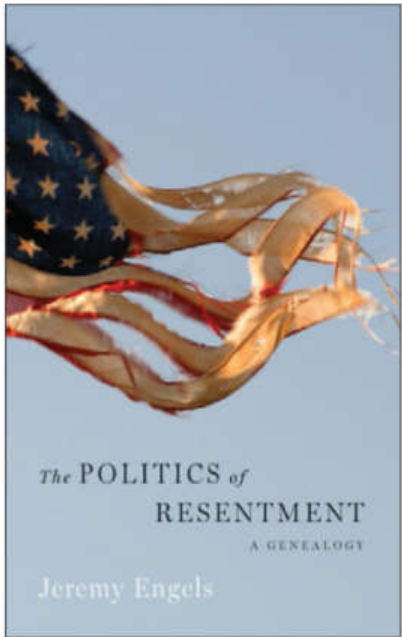
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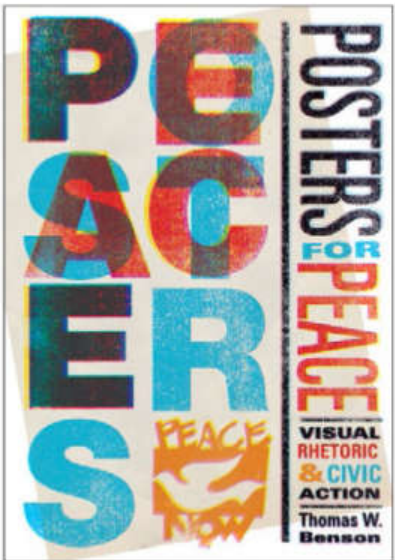


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# What Do These People Want?

Diane Johnson

## Purity

by Jonathan Franzen.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
563 pp., \$28.00

### 1.

Admirers of Jonathan Franzen's witty, brilliantly observed novels of contemporary American family life—*The Corrections* and *Freedom*—will find that his new novel, *Purity*, departs from his previous allegiance to comic realism; it's a complex narrative of fates intertwined and twinned, international crimes, dark secrets, a whirl of events unfolding at fairy-tale or comic-book speed. There is the tale of Pip, whose quest is to learn the identity of her father; and that of Andreas, a world-famous Internet leaker operating from Bolivia after a childhood under communism in East Berlin; of Tom and Leila, journalists in Denver uncovering a Strangelovean plot to steal a nuclear bomb; a reclusive woman who won't tell her daughter her real name; and much more.

In one of his essays ("Mr. Difficult"), Franzen distinguishes between one kind of novel, "Status" novels, like those written by Flaubert, Proust, Kafka, and especially William Gaddis, that invite a "discourse of genius and art-historical importance"; and the kind of novel he likes to read and believes in, "Contract" novels, referring to the compact between writer and reader, who both expect novels to be enjoyed, to be inspiring, to sell. *Purity* makes a stab at having "Status" qualities in its complicated chronology and ambitious array of moral concerns, but in its page-turning sequence of events and hot sex scenes it also tries to fulfill the "Contract."

As with opera synopses, any narrative, reduced to its plot details, can sound ridiculous, so the reader may find it helpful to think of the melodramatic *Purity* as conforming more closely to the familiar genre of the folk tale than to the sort of lyrical/realistic fiction we have had from Franzen before. In a structuralist view, it follows archetypal patterns: there's the Heroine, Pip. (The Dickensian allusion of her name will become clear as the narrative moves along.) Her reclusive mother (who is either the Princess or the Witch) refuses to tell Pip who her father (the King) is or her real last name. As in a fairy tale, Pip must embark on a Journey of discovery, she meets the Villain disguised as a friend, and so on. This basic paradigm is of course given a contemporary cloak: Pip is a penniless university student living in a sort of Oakland squat; her mother is a loving but depressed single woman who has attempted to bring Pip up in virtuous simplicity and near poverty in a cottage. There will be gold at the end of the quest.

The narrative is broken into seven sections out of chronological order, each focusing on a different character, some written in the first person, with many flashbacks. A précis may help illuminate some of the observations to follow. It's worth noting that there is very little description of the



Jonathan Franzen, 2002

material world except where it is necessary to get the characters in and out of rooms, or to Denver or Belize, where they can continue their ruminations and reproaches; the fast-moving events are recounted in serviceable and self-effacing language.

In Part One, at her Oakland squat, Pip meets a German woman, Annagret, who puts her on to an Internet guru, a charismatic Julian Assange figure, and plants the idea that his command of the Internet may help her discover her father's identity, along with allowing her to do good in the world by bringing hidden wrongs to light, a mission that accords with Pip's idealistic upbringing. Andreas Wolf, the Assange figure, is a German who heads a cultish organization, located in Bolivia, of hackers and leakers ostensibly bringing transparency to the world—the Sunlight Project. We meet Andreas in Part Two. His is the most interesting of the intertwined stories for its details about his upbringing in East Berlin as the child of privileged Communist Party intellectuals. We are told quite a bit about Andreas's psychosexual development, arriving at an ambitious portrait of a charismatic, lecherous, puritanical, and conflicted idealist as viewed through the lenses of Freud and Sophocles.

It's Wolf's mind that is most thoroughly examined and best understood, even though it is the most deranged. His torment arises from a crime: when he was about twenty, Andreas conspired with a beautiful girl he loved (Annagret) to kill her stepfather, who was molesting her. This dark deed will shadow his conscience from then on, and drive him to confess it to one or two people, eventually to a young American he meets in Berlin, Tom Aberant. Tom is his doppelgänger, though it would be too simple to say that Tom is the super-

ego and Andreas the id; they are mirrored characters, as are Annagret and Anabel, their wives.

In *Purity*, we don't often venture into the female consciousness, not even Pip's, so Annagret and Anabel may have a side we haven't heard, but as seen by Franzen, wives, mothers, and women in general are a problem; they are almost uniformly nattering, tiresome, self-involved, and not very bright, when they're not actual monsters like Anabel. At any rate, the male characters see them this way. Oedipus and Hamlet notwithstanding, we never do quite understand Andreas's resentment of his mother; her having affairs, or being a Party official, or him seeing her naked hardly seems enough to explain his powerful rage, an emotion Franzen has elsewhere claimed as an important wellspring of his own work.

### 2.

Men trapped in marriage: whereas in *The Corrections*, Franzen viewed his characters with Olympian sympathy (for instance in his treatment of the marriage of the mother and the father with Alzheimer's disease), it is in *Purity* that he comes closest to less sympathetic things he has written about his own life and marriage, his moral concerns and aversions, his overdeveloped sense of guilt, some past rather obsessive and strange ideas about sex, and so on. Probably people will differ about whether he has made too great a sacrifice of a high comedic perspective for the satisfactions of confession or revenge, or whether this new direction comes from some misunderstanding of the Contract. In any case, his candid autobiographical writings allow us to infer that aspects of Andreas and Tom may come close to Franzen's own

experiences, especially Andreas the antihero in the banal part of husband of Annagret:

During the day, when they were apart, he kept picturing [Annagret's] solemn gaze, but when he came home he found a person with no resemblance to the object he'd desired. She was tired, had cramps, had evening plans.... He had only to call home and hear her voice for two minutes to be bored with her.

This is nearly interchangeable with Tom Aberant's account of his marriage to Anabel:

My life had become a nightmare of exactly the female reproach I'd dedicated it to avoiding. To avoid it from my mother was to invite it from Anabel, and vice versa; there was no way out.

It goes without saying that both Tom and Andreas hate and/or resent their mothers too. However melodramatic the main story, when it comes to marriage, the two main male characters appear in archetypal, almost sitcom detail in painful passages whose intensely felt quality exudes faintly autobiographical whiffs. To continue with Andreas and Annagret:

But the problem with sex as an idea was that ideas could change. By and by, Annagret developed a different and much drearier idea, of total honesty in bed, with heavy emphasis on discussion. [But] endless discussion with a humorless twenty-three-year-old bored him.... Even worse, [she] wanted to discuss her feelings. Or, worst of all, wanted to discuss *his* feelings.

When it comes to Tom's experience of an impossible woman, there's Anabel's fierce feminism. She complains about everything, for instance:

"I have to sit down," she said finally. "Why shouldn't *you* sit down? I can't not see where you spatter, and every time I see it I think how unfair it is to be a woman."

In Part Three we have more detail about Tom and a new woman, Leila, a nice journalist, now Tom's longtime partner, though she is still married to a paraplegic writer, Charles Blenheim. Charles was once a promising novelist, still hoping to be important; *The New York Times Book Review* had praised the "twinned muscularity and febrility" of his style. Franzen's comic riffs are at their best in the world of letters, when he gets going on writers like Charles, or journalists like Leila and Tom:

After she won a prize for her reporting (Colorado State Fair mismanagement), she dared to excuse herself from the dinners that Charles was obliged to host for visiting writers. Oh, the drinking at those ghastly dinners, the inevitable slighting of Charles, the addition of yet another name to

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his hate list. Practically the only living American writers Charles didn't hate now were his students and former students, and if any of the latter had some success it was only a matter of time before they slighted him, betrayed him, and he added them to the list.

Leila would have liked a baby, but it would discomfort Charles's art. To compensate for her childlessness and paraplegic husband, she has taken up with Tom, though Leila suspects he is still stuck on his ex-wife, with whom he had no children—the impossible Anabel, daughter of a fabulously rich tycoon. Having denied Anabel children, he doesn't feel entitled to have a baby with Leila, even though Anabel hadn't been heard from in years.

In Denver, we rejoin Pip, an intern with Tom's newspaper, sent there by the spellbinding, now world-famous Andreas after her sojourn with him in Bolivia. Guessing that she is his old friend Tom's daughter, Andreas has ordered her to Colorado to learn journalism, and actually to find out whether Tom is likely to reveal Andreas's dark secret. Still broke, she's befriended by Leila, and moves in with her and Tom.

Leila and Pip are covering a story about a plot to steal a nuke, a typical Franzenian digression that can sometimes come as a welcome distraction, though that is not necessarily the case here. In fact, in the welter of journalism-speak, the reader's attention may be wandering, despite the lively nuke story, worth mentioning, though, for it sounds a note of the lively former Franzen in a sort of DeLillo (Status novelist) mode:

Pip was on the phone with a Sonic Drive-In manager, trying to reach Phyllisha Babcock, whose tale of death-bomb sex had squeaked into the article in one-graf form, when the office IT manager, Ken Warmbold, came by her desk. He waited while she wrote down the hours of Phyllisha's shift....

Leila has misgivings about having an attractive young woman in the house with Tom, who seems worryingly drawn to their new tenant. But in an opera-worthy coincidence scene, the mysterious attraction is explained: Tom, having glimpsed a picture of Pip's mother on her cell phone, confesses to Leila that he believes Pip is Anabel's daughter and he himself probably her father:

"I'm sorry," Tom said. "I know it's a lot to hear."

"A lot to hear? You have a child. You have a daughter you didn't know about for twenty-five years.... I'd say, yes, that's quite a lot for me to hear."

The fourth part is a flashback to Pip's arrival in South America to work on the Sunlight Project, which she found was pretty much staffed by women Andreas Wolf had slept with. This looks like where she's heading too, but Pip can't seem to go through with making love to people. Eventually she submits to the "negocitos he was expertly transacting with his mouth" but fails to do "the polite thing" in return. There's

another scene like this a few weeks later. Never mind, he tells her, it only increases her desirability, though it's unclear throughout what Pip's desirability can possibly be, as she's not given beauty or cleverness, and often screws things up.

Part Five is Tom's first-person account of his marriage, twenty-five years before, to the neurotic, difficult Anabel. He tells of an occasion when they made love after their divorce. Then he digresses into the story of his German parents' meeting and coming to America. Then how he met Anabel in college. Each story is absorbing and often funny, but the connections come to seem too driven by the objective correlatives. Tom was shy about sex because of his first experience with Mary Ellen Stahlstrom, who let out a shriek when he "accidentally delivered a sharp masculine poke to the very most sensitive and off-limits part of Mary Ellen."

Mary Ellen's anally violated shriek was ringing in my ears when I matriculated at Penn. My father had suggested that I choose a smaller college, but Penn had offered me a scholarship....

Tom's funny, sympathetic confession is a novella of 125 pages and concludes with his version of meeting Andreas Wolf in East Berlin, all those years ago, and being entrusted with the secret of Andreas's past; he recollects how, as an act of friendship, he had helped Andreas rebury the victim's bones. His account then returns to his last scenes with Anabel, her father's death, the mystery of her disappearance:

I've never stopped wondering where Anabel is and whether she's alive.... I remain convinced that I'll see her again.... I couldn't go on and have children with anyone else, because I'd prevented her from having them.

By now the reader has guessed many of the answers to the questions he's raised—where is Anabel? what is the connection to Pip? The more interesting question is, why has Franzen chosen this complicated chronology?

### 3.

In Part Six we're once again with Andreas Wolf in Bolivia, entering his Jim Jones phase, morphing into a dictator of the New Regime, the Sunlight Project, which "now functioned mainly as an extension of his ego. A fame factory masquerading as a secrets factory." His dreams of global influence through the power of the Internet are all subjects that have interested Franzen elsewhere:

There were a lot of could-be Snowdens inside the New Regime, employees with access to the algorithms that Facebook used to monetize its users' privacy and Twitter to manipulate memes that were supposedly self-generating. But smart people were actually more terrified of the New Regime than of what the regime had persuaded

less-smart people to be afraid of, the NSA, the CIA....

There are allusions to current events and montages of celebrity names we recognize, as when Andreas visits Tad Milliken,

the Silicon Valley venture capitalist who'd retired to Belize to avoid the inconvenience of a statutory-rape charge pending against him in California. He was certifiably insane, an Ayn Rander..., but he was surprisingly good company if you kept him on topics like fishing and tennis.

Despite these new friends, and the echoes of Ted Turner, Michael Milken, and Roman Polanski, the guilt and ego-



Drawing by Edward Gorey

tism raging in Andreas are soon to spin out of control:

He was at once the man he'd killed and the man who'd killed him, and since another dark hallway existed in his memory, the dark hallway between his childhood bedroom and his mother's, there was a further twisting of chronology whereby his mother had given birth to the monster who was Annagret's stepfather, he was that monster, and he'd killed him in order to become him....

Now come many more pages of exposition of Andreas's guilty deterioration, his rage at his mother, at women:

He was prone to Killer-sponsored fantasies, some of them so offensive to his self-image (for example, the fantasy of coming on Annagret while she was sleeping) that it took a huge exertion of honesty to clock them before he suppressed them.

Gothic depiction of madness is not perhaps Franzen's best vein; it is better pursued by people who are actual geniuses at it, like Stephen King. Andreas

began to cry. The Killer stirred in him again, sensing opportunity in his tears, his regression. The Killer liked regression. The Killer liked it when he was four and Annagret fifteen. Blindly, with his eyes squeezed shut, he sought her lips with his.

Next, the account suddenly shifts from a picture of his "titanic rage," back to his earlier life with Annagret, the young woman whose stepfather he'd killed to save her from molestation, when, after some harmonious years, their relationship deteriorates and boredom sets in—boredom is another Franzen preoccupation. The picture of a deteriorating, guilt-ridden, and de-

pressed man soon to commit suicide is replaced by a generic, resentful husband who might have equally been Tom:

He saw that he'd trapped himself. He'd set up house less with a woman than with a wishful concept of himself as a man who could live happily ever after with a woman. And now he was bored with the concept.... He behaved like a jerk and paid a price for it in self-regard, but he persisted in it, hoping that she would recognize it as a well-known sign of trouble in a relationship, and that maybe, eventually, he would be able to escape the trap.

The writer rushes us through this domestic crisis by "telling" it, as writing students are instructed not to do. There are only flashes of the sort of engaging sentences found in *The Corrections*, with their precise distinctions and witty metaphors. In *Purity* the prose is serviceably workaday, and by the end of Andreas's section, it dissolves into pages and pages of exposition, as if it were *Soap Opera Digest*, or as if the writer had become bored with Andreas and Tom, or was worried his readers might be, and is observing the Contract by considerably shortening scenes

he would normally dramatize. Too bad—as readers, five hundred pages in, we would have stuck with our investment for the fun of hearing what Andreas and Annagret say when they are finally frank with each other.

Referring to his marital boredom, Andreas again calls attention to the "disparity between the nighttime object he desired and the daytime actuality of Annagret." This is the disparity that troubles the entire novel: the tension between a writer confident of his daylight powers—the daylight of domestic realism is exemplified by Tom's section—and a writer pushing himself into darker places and different registers with less success.

Andreas will perish in a dramatic suicide fall over a cliff, as in a comic book, aaaargh. Despite his villain's fate, he is the character we know best and most regret. For all his ostensible ruthlessness, his youthful crime harrows him the way it wouldn't the taciturn Pip, who has no affect whatever, challenged social skills, and who one can see is well on the way to turning into her mother, the controlling Anabel. At the end, a boy she's attracted to, Jason, invites her to hit tennis balls:

"If you didn't have a girlfriend, I'd be happy to hit with you. But you do, so."

"You're telling me I have to break up with my girlfriend before you'll hit with me? It's a pretty substantial upfront investment for just hitting a tennis ball."

Pip will discover that she is to inherit a trust fund worth \$1 billion—such is the factor of inflation that a billion is needed for a fairy-tale pot of gold to be worthwhile these days. Like her mother, Pip wants to be Good. She bails her Oakland friends out of their eviction problems by buying their squat, and takes up with Jason





Krishna Fluting for Gopis (detail), late 18th or early 19th century. Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India. Gift of Marilyn B. Alsdorf.

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the tennis player. There is no trace of transcendence, no possibility she won't end up the mess her mother was. But a billion dollars! We shouldn't underrate the satisfactions of fairy tales, after all an enduring form, as we've seen with, say, Donna Tartt's recent success.

Despite the superficially happy ending, readers will be struck finally by the

real subjects of the novel, anxiety and that preoccupying modern subject, the search for identity. Despite the ostensible devotion to good works, feminist causes, governmental transparency, and so on, at bottom the characters all, like Andreas, have "no interest at all in doing the right thing if the wrong thing would save [them] from public shame"

or give psychic gratification. Each character tries on several selves, and is uncomfortable in all of them.

As a novel about inauthenticity and intense self-consciousness, and as a portrait of the modern world, it's convincing enough, if depressing. Franzen, from whom so much is expected, seems, like Andreas, on a sort of (lit-

erary) mountaintop, with several paths down, the one he came up just now, mined with melodrama and misstep; or there's the Status flag planted a little higher up the slope, if he has the energy for climbing with his already heavy backpack of Contract books, and if he takes some time to contemplate the view before getting back to work. □

# How the Germans Closed Ranks Around Hitler

Max Hastings

## The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939–1945: Citizens and Soldiers

by Nicholas Stargardt.  
Basic Books, 704 pp., \$35.00

## Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe

by Michael Neiberg.  
Basic Books, 310 pp., \$29.99

## Ministers at War: Winston Churchill and His War Cabinet

by Jonathan Schneer.  
Basic Books, 323 pp., \$29.99

In 1943, Germans who enjoyed a joke envisaged two panzer-grenadiers sitting on a bridgehead in Russia in 1999, puzzling over an incomprehensible word they have come across in a book: PEACE. No one in their bunker understands it. The platoon sergeant shrugs his shoulders. Their lieutenant shakes his head, and the next day at headquarters asks the battalion commander what it means. This august figure consults a new dictionary and finds the definition: "Peace, way of life unfit for human beings, abolished in 1939."

This sort of gallows humor, says Nicholas Stargardt in his book *The German War*, was a significant element in a formula tried and tested between 1914 and 1918 for *durchhalten*—"holding out"—in the extraordinary fashion the German people did between 1942 and 1945, Hitler's years of eclipse, in which around 90 percent of all those who perished in the global conflict met their fates.

The journalist Ursula von Kardorff, no admirer of the Nazis, retreated to the countryside for several days in November 1943, amid the first concentrated RAF bombing of Berlin. But she returned to the city, and to her job, fortified by a surge of determination to resist the attackers: "I feel a wild vitality welling up within me, mixed with defiance—the opposite of resignation." The bombing, she thought, far from breaking the spirit of the German people, was welding unity: "If the English believe they can undermine morale, then that's a miscalculation."

Far too many books are written about the leading Nazis, personalities of awesome banality. The proper object for study must be the German people. How could it be that one of the most educated societies in Europe, the nation of Thomas Mann, inheritors of centuries of high culture and scientific achievement, fell prey to the designs of such gangsters as Hitler, Himmler, and

Goebbels, and remained so even when it became plain that the outcome must be an epic catastrophe?

Nicholas Stargardt, an Oxford professor of modern history, draws on diaries, letters, and contemporary documents to paint a huge social canvas of Germans at war, soldiers and civilians, men and women of all ages. There are many unexpected vignettes, such as that concerning Kurt Gerstein, a disinfection expert and SS officer, who visited the Belzec and Treblinka extermination facilities in August 1942.

Gerstein found himself sharing a compartment on the night train back to Berlin with a Swedish diplomat, and risked telling this man what he had seen. Himself a devout Protestant, back in the capital he also reported the gassing of Jews to Otto Dibelius, the liberal Protestant bishop of Berlin, and Dibelius's Catholic counterpart Konrad Count von Preysing. Nothing came of his revelations, any more than when he told his own father, a retired judge. Gerstein reproached this parent with a scorn that suggested generational role reversal:

When a man has spent his professional life in the service of the law something must have happened inside him during these last few years.... You said: Hard times demand tough methods!—No! No maxim of that kind is adequate to justify what has happened.

Bishop August Clement, Count von Galen of Munster, was another of those who became lost in a moral maze. He protested vigorously and courageously against the Nazis' first extermination program, directed against mentally handicapped patients. He deplored the ethics of seeking retaliation in kind for Allied bombing of German cities. But he offered impassioned support for the invasion of Russia, which he and other bishops characterized as a "crusade" against "Godless Bolshevism." After Germany's defeat, the bishop offered thanks to his country's

Christian soldiers...who in good conscience of doing right have risked their lives for the nation and Fatherland and who even in the

hubbub of war kept their hearts and hands clean of hatred, plundering and unjust acts of violence.... The soldier's death stands in honour and value next to the martyr's death.

In seeking to understand Europe during the Nazi era, it is essential to recall that in 1933 the Russian Revolution lay only sixteen years in the past; Stalin was sustaining the slaughter of innocents initiated by Lenin. Terror of Bolshevism—well-merited terror—was a phenomenon common to the bourgeoisie of the entire continent. Only a small, enlightened minority acknowledged from the outset that fascism posed an equal menace. Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia had existed as independent states for less than two decades, and it seemed hard to regard their frontiers as beyond dispute.

Many of Hitler's people nursed grievances about their loss of national territory under the Versailles Treaty and about the sufferings, real and imagined, of German minorities in Eastern Europe. As Stargardt notes laconically, "only German rights mattered." In 1939 there was no popular enthusiasm for war, but this blossomed during the first year of the conflict: "Victory was sweet because it seemed astonishingly easy."

When Hitler's September 1940 peace offer to Churchill was rejected, many Germans saw this as evidence of their enemies' intransigence. William Shirer's Berlin house cleaner grumbled: "Why didn't the British accept the Führer's offer?" The author identifies intergenerational support for the June 1941 onslaught upon Stalin's people:

What bound fathers and sons together was more than shared experience.... The sons had to achieve what their fathers had failed to do. They had to break the cycle of repetition, which condemned each generation to fight in Russia.

Aryans must prevail over Slavs, they believed, or be destroyed by them.

As the war intensified, then turned against Germany in the wake of Stalingrad, a different mood overtook the nation. First came shock at the discovery that the Wehrmacht was not invincible; revelation of the hollow mockery of Goering's pronouncement that if a single enemy aircraft bombed the Reich, he would call himself Meier. There followed a national closing of ranks, a stiffening of sinews, that astonished the Nazis themselves.

Liselotte Purper, a Hamburger, contemplated Germany's bomb-battered



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*German civilians on an enforced visit to Buchenwald concentration camp, April 1945; photograph by Lee Miller from the exhibition 'Lee Miller: A Woman's War,' on view at the Imperial War Museum, London, October 15, 2015–April 24, 2016. The catalog—by Hilary Roberts, with an introduction by Antony Penrose—will be published in the US by Thames and Hudson in December.*



cities and professed herself filled with impotent rage, not toward Hitler but instead against the “global criminal conspiracy [moved by] such a bottomless hatred, such a fanatical will to destroy as there never has been in the world. They know not what they do!” Even most of those who considered themselves anti-Nazis, says Stargardt, could not bring themselves to wish for Germany’s defeat, though “their sense of profound vulnerability grew.”

Intermingled with expressions of outraged victimhood such as that of Frau Purper was the fact that enough Germans knew what they had done to other nations, especially to Russians and Jews, to conclude that if they lost the war, retribution must follow that seemed likely to be annihilatory. Stargardt writes:

Neither Nazism nor the war itself could be rejected, because Germans envisaged their own defeat in existential terms. The worse their war went, the more obviously “defensive” it became. Far from leading to collapse, successive crises acted as catalysts of radical transformation.... Major disasters like Stalingrad and Hamburg did indeed lead to a catastrophic fall in the regime’s popularity, but they did not in themselves call patriotic commitment into question.

If the Germans had thrown in the towel in 1943 or 1944, on any terms or more plausibly on none, they could have spared themselves the worst consequences of Hitler, and the more than two million German deaths that took

place in the last year of the war, at Russian hands or from Allied bombing that attained a crescendo at Dresden, Chemnitz, Leipzig.

Stargardt does not address at length the moral failure of the army, the one force in Germany capable of overthrowing the Nazis: only a small minority of officers participated in the ineffectual July 1944 bomb plot against Hitler. He probably takes the view that this issue has been exhaustively addressed in many other books, as indeed it has. But it poses an intractable dilemma for the author of any work of this kind, which afflicted even the third and last volume of Richard Evans’s monumental study of the Third Reich, to determine how far it is necessary to retrace familiar historical narrative for the sake of completeness. Stargardt addresses extensively and well the active or passive complicity of vast numbers of Germans in the Holocaust, but we have known about this for years.

It is an interesting semantic point that in the later war years Nazi rhetoric constantly deployed the word “fanatical” with approbation, when instructing the German people on the conduct expected of them. Anglo-Saxons, of course, reflexively recoil from fanaticism: no Englishman would have applauded it as an ideal, even in the darkest days of 1940.

Since 1945, much ink has been expended on arguing the case that the Allies were wrong to insist upon Germany’s unconditional surrender, because this persuaded anti-Nazis that

they had no choice but to fight on. Yet even most of the plotters who tried to kill Hitler in July 1944, including Colonel Claus von Stauffenburg himself, were not liberals but right-wing nationalists with amazing delusions about the prospect of preserving Germany’s 1939 frontiers in a negotiation with the Allies.

One of Woodrow Wilson’s biggest mistakes was to insist that Germany should be granted an armistice in November 1918, rather than being obliged to surrender. This, together with the fact that the Kaiser’s country emerged from the conflict structurally intact, created the basis for later Nazi claims of the “stab in the back,” the pretense that Germany had not really been defeated.

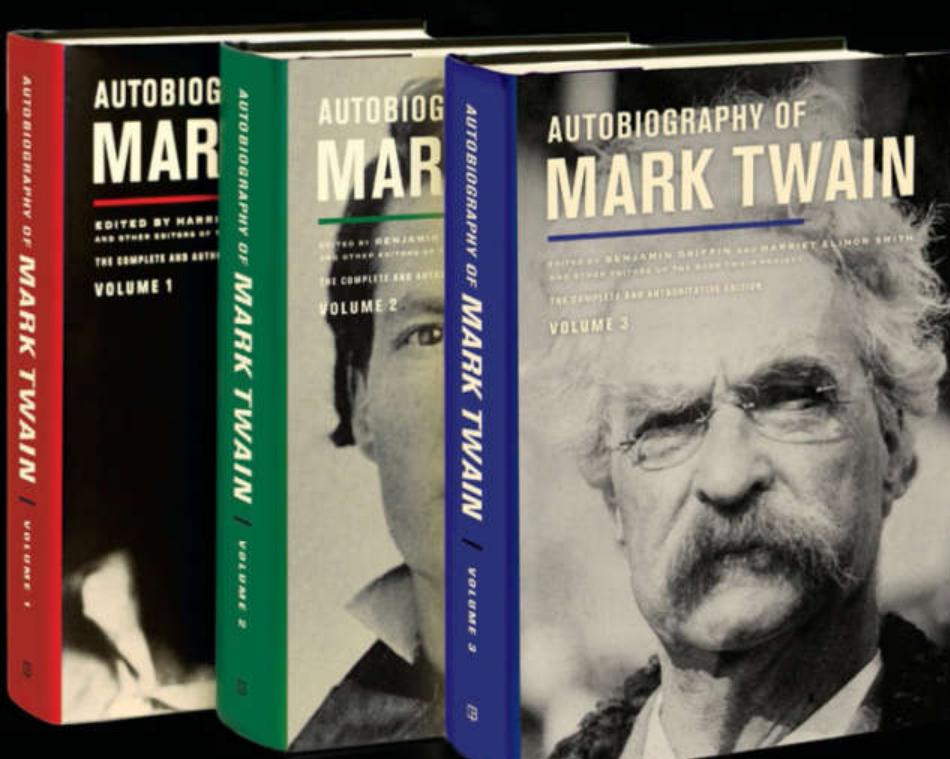
At the end of World War II, amid the absolute ruin of the Reich, there could be no such delusion. The Western Allies had compromised the virtue of their cause by joining with Stalin’s bloodstained tyranny, and by allowing Russia to bear most of the blood sacrifice for destroying Nazism. But once they did this, it is hard to imagine how any negotiated peace could have been offered or achieved, to which Moscow would have agreed to be a party, or to which the Americans and British should have been.

Nicholas Stargardt notes that in the twenty-first century, Germans have become hugely interested in their own wartime past, though favoring TV programs and books created by their compatriots rather than by British or American authors:

The victim narrative has been most prominent, as interviewers have concentrated on unearthing the buried memories of civilians who experienced the fire-bombing of German cities by the RAF and the USAAF, the epic flight ahead of the Red Army and the killing and rape which so often followed.... Groups of self-designated “war children” formed and everywhere commentators reached for terms like “trauma” and “collective trauma”... [which] tends to emphasise the passivity and innocence of the victims.

More than a decade ago, I myself interviewed for a book a German woman who, in 1945, had suffered many humiliations at the hands of the Red Army, alongside her daughter. She said: “It was so terrible, going through all that, when we knew we had done nothing wrong.” She allowed knowledge that she had killed no Jews, raped no Russian women, to banish any sense of personal shame or guilt, both at the time and since. Stargardt observes that only the extreme right in Germany today seeks to establish a direct moral equivalence between the Holocaust and Allied bombing. Yet it seems depressing enough that many modern Germans wish to regard their parents and grandparents as kindred to the peoples of the nations they invaded and ravaged, all alike victims of Hitler rather than his accomplices.

The publishers describe this book as “the definitive portrait of Nazi Germany during World War II.” No portrait of anything or anyone is




The surprising final chapter of  
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# AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

## VOLUME 3

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“definitive” and any publicist who suggests otherwise should be sent for pulping. Stargardt’s judgments seem impeccably sensible, but they are scarcely original: his furrows are well ploughed. The author nonetheless tells his bleak story fluently and well, and illustrates it with a host of telling and often unfamiliar anecdotes.

The historian Sir Michael Howard argues wisely that counterfactuals are not the proper business of historians, but it is sometimes salutary to consider “what ifs?” Had Hitler conquered Britain, some of us suspect that under occupation its people would have behaved a little, but not much, better than did the French. The aristocracy and commercial classes would have collaborated wholesale.

Likewise Stargardt describes how one German doctor in 1939 tipped off the families of mentally handicapped patients in his sanatorium that their loved ones were destined for extermination, and urged their removal. Few took advantage of his warning. Are we sure, absolutely sure, that in the same circumstances American or British people would have displayed greater compassion? The likely answer, like so many answers to so many questions of this kind, may be uncomfortable for humanitarians.

Most Germans found the first decade of the Nazi era deeply gratifying. When Hitler’s grand vision went wrong for his own people—several years after it began to impose ghastly horrors on the rest of the world—all but a small minority of his people were too busy feeling sorry for themselves to spare sympathy for his victims abroad and at home, least of all Jews. As for the Wehrmacht, no student of its mid-twentieth century record could with a straight face describe its leaders as officers and gentlemen.

A popular delusion exists that while the victorious Allies messed up the end of World War I by making a botched treaty at Versailles, they somehow did better after 1945. It is certainly true that continuing American strategic and economic engagement, exemplified by NATO and the Marshall Plan, led to a much better outcome for Western Europe. But it is hard to propose congratulations all around, when 90 million hapless East Europeans merely exchanged Soviet tyranny for the Nazi variety; upward of half a million Germans perished in the 1945–1946 refugee flights and ethnic cleansing of minorities in the East; and a murderous civil war in Greece persisted until 1949.

It is very hard to bring a vast global conflict to a tidy conclusion. Protracted piecemeal diplomacy achieved more than did “Big Three” summits. In July 1945, the Allies nonetheless conducted the last such wartime meeting at Potsdam. Winston Churchill, impatient to meet the new US president, was the prime mover for it, and harbored his accustomed delusion that his own physical presence could extract more from the Russians and Americans than Britain’s shrunken national status could secure.

Before the conference began in the mock-Tudor Cecilienhof Palace built for the Kaiser’s son during World War I, the British and American delegations engaged in some half-awed, half-appalled tourism amid the wreckage

of Berlin. Their Russian hosts were entirely accommodating, indulging even the generals’ and officials’ quest for souvenirs from Hitler’s bunker. Churchill gazed without animosity upon the Germans foraging amid the rubble: “My hate died with their surrender,” he wrote later. “I was much moved by their desolation.”

But when the serious business of the conference began, Churchill was seen to little advantage. He was old and tired, and had failed to do his homework. He lapsed into rambling monologues, and allowed himself to be charmed by Stalin. So poor was his instinct for the new age that, when news was passed to him of the successful atomic bomb test at Alamogordo, he expressed enthusiasm for the prospect of brandishing this threat to bring the Russians to heel in Eastern Europe.

Michael Neiberg’s account of Potsdam dwells at length on the clumsy cramming process to which Harry Truman was subjected, following Roosevelt’s death on April 12. This was handicapped by the disappearance of the records of earlier wartime summits at Tehran, Cairo, and Yalta, so that officials were obliged to brief the new president on American positions from their own imperfect and often contradictory memories.

The book quotes extensively the remarks of Joseph Davies, a former US ambassador in Moscow and one of the most disastrous Americans ever to represent his country abroad. Davies wrote in earnest of Stalin in 1938: “A child would like to sit on his lap and a dog would sidle up to him.” He played a marginal role on the US team at Potsdam, and the author treats both his character and contribution with less contempt than they deserve.

The “Big Three” met thirteen times at Potsdam, their foreign ministers twelve. On the last four occasions, following the July 26 announcement of Labour’s triumph in the British election, Churchill was supplanted by Clement Attlee, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden by Ernest Bevin. This operation of democracy baffled the Russians, who had taken it for granted that Churchill had power enough to fix the result. It emphasized the Soviet impression of the Western delegations as fumbling novices, of Stalin alone as the assured master of his own nation’s destinies.

Yet Truman did as well as any man could have expected of him at Potsdam, given the huge handicaps under which he labored, not least having the inadequate James Byrnes as his secretary of state. He conducted himself with dignity and firmness, making plain America’s intention to remain engaged in Europe, rather than to retreat into isolationism as in 1919. He set off home, after a mere three weeks abroad, satisfied that he had achieved the two foremost US policy objectives: to make the Russians biddable members of the new United Nations, and to persuade them to attack the Japanese in Manchuria.

The Americans failed to perceive that Stalin, rather than requiring any

inducements to join the war against Japan, was bent upon doing so, to secure territorial booty on the Pacific coast. He cared little one way or another about the UN, a mere talking shop. What he wanted, and got, out of Potsdam was to stage a protracted victory parade, and to make plain to the Western Allies that Poland was now a Soviet imperial dependency. The British and Americans reluctantly agreed to cede eastern Poland to Russia along the so-called Curzon Line, so that Stalin kept the Polish turf he had secured from Hitler in the August 1939 Nazi–Soviet Pact.

But what choice was there? As Stalin mockingly demanded at the conference

Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler



table: “Did your army liberate Poland, Mr. Churchill? Did your army liberate Poland, Mr. President?” The Red Army held Eastern Europe, and could be dislodged only by force of arms. In May 1945, Churchill had caused his chiefs of staff to draw up a detailed plan for Operation Unthinkable, to dislodge the Russians from Poland using forty-two Anglo-American divisions—and the remains of Hitler’s Wehrmacht. Naturally Washington rejected this crazy notion out of hand, but the fascinating planning document still exists, and it is a little disappointing that Neiberg does not mention it.

His problem, in this entirely unexceptionable narrative, is to make a case that Potsdam changed or decided anything. The conference was a fascinating piece of theater, wherein Stalin toyed effortlessly with Churchill and Truman. All the strategic and atomic secrets that they cradled out of sight with the glee of schoolboys were known to him through American and British traitors.

The author, a professor at the US Army War College, describes how on the way home, aboard the cruiser USS *Augusta*, Truman and Byrnes hit the bourbon together “as they celebrated their success at Potsdam.” The new president later developed into one of the most distinguished statesmen in American history, his high quality especially manifested in the June 1950 Korean crisis. In July 1945, he impressed Europeans as a solid, decent,

and trustworthy US leader. But the only participant in the conference entitled to rejoice at getting everything he wanted was Joseph Stalin. World War II achieved its real conclusion not at Potsdam, but with the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent collapse of Stalin’s empire.

Many Americans, both at the time and since, have viewed Britain’s wartime governance through a Churchillian prism. It is certainly true that the prime minister dominated his nation’s affairs more than did Roosevelt those of the United States. But Jonathan Schneer’s book, *Ministers at War*, provides a corrective, emphasizing the important parts played by the War Cabinet, a supporting cast of five to eight members, to whom Churchill had the good sense to delegate many matters in which he was uninterested, and which he knew himself unqualified to arbitrate.

Sir John Anderson, the career civil servant who served as lord president of the council and latterly as chancellor of the exchequer, was mocked by Lord Beaverbrook and Brendan Bracken as “Pomposo,” and indeed Anderson was an arid, lofty figure. But he was an exceptionally able administrator, unafraid of standing up to his leader.

Ernest Bevin, minister of labor, was born into poverty in 1881, worked as a Bristol docker, then rose to become the most powerful trade unionist in Europe, leading the five million members of the Transport

and General Workers Union. Bevin, a passionate anti-Communist, was perhaps the only man in Britain with the moral and political authority to sustain working-class support for what might otherwise have been deemed a “Tory war.” There were wartime strikes in plenty, but this rough, tough, chunky man with great hands likened to bunches of bananas earned the respect as well as affection of all those who served with him.

Except, perhaps, Sir Stafford Cripps. The two men hated each other. Cripps was an upper-middle-class Marxist ascetic who had been a highly successful lawyer before entering Labour politics in 1928. He served in 1940–1941 as British ambassador in Moscow, but Stalin vastly preferred the company of Lord Beaverbrook, the capitalist red in tooth and claw, to that of Cripps the would-be champion of the proletariat. Schneer reminds us that, extraordinary as it now seems, at a low point of Churchill’s fortunes as prime minister in 1942, for a time it seemed as if Cripps might supplant him—especially to Cripps.

The prime minister detested the man: “he has all of the virtues I dislike, and none of the vices I admire,” but felt obliged to admit him to the War Cabinet in February 1942 as Lord Privy Seal and leader of the Commons. Cripps’s stock fell, however, when he led a mission to India, in a vain attempt to persuade its nationalists to postpone



independence until the war ended. On his return, he made repeated foolish demands—for instance, for an immediate general election, and for the creation of a three-man “military directorate” to oversee the chiefs of staff, one of whom would be himself.

He antagonized a host of humble British people by proclaiming his opposition to their favorite sports—boxing, horse and dog racing. Cripps was a clever, honest man bereft of wisdom. He kept threatening to resign, but fatally delayed doing so until after the November El Alamein offensive, the success of which made Churchill politically invulnerable.

Clement Attlee, leader of the Labour Party and deputy prime minis-

ter, played a thankless role, subject to many indignities at his chief's hands. But Attlee gained the respect of all who worked with him for his patience, loyalty, modesty, and hard work in support of the war effort, especially chairing Cabinet committees. It is good that he secures his due from this book by Schnee, as does the villainous Lord Beaverbrook.

“The Beaver,” a press baron to whom Churchill felt closer than any other man after the death of Lord Birkenhead, commanded the prime minister's fascination for his wit and wealth. He enjoyed a brief moment of glory as minister of aircraft production in 1940–1941, hastening Spitfire and Hurricane production through the Battle

of Britain. But many historians believe that his achievement was greater as a self-publicist and impresario than as an industrial manager.

Thereafter, Beaverbrook drifted in and out of office as the mood suited him, indulged by Churchill in repeated acts of treachery, especially his noisy campaign for a premature second front in France. Schnee writes: “Beaverbrook did not so much crave the top position—although occasionally he thought he could fill it better than anyone else—as crave excitement.” Beaverbrook was a clever but unprincipled man, unworthy of Churchill's intimacy.

Schnee concludes: “It is useful to remember that Churchill's colleagues

did not treat him with the reverence he so often receives today.” If the War Cabinet had bowed and scraped rather than argued, its members would have been undeserving of credit. The author salutes these “giants as they really were, harnessed together to a common purpose, but often pulling in opposite directions.” He justly concludes that Churchill's choice of such men for his War Cabinet, and skillful management of them in office, constituted an important element of his own greatness as national leader in his finest years. Whatever the limits of Britain's military contribution to victory, it could boast the most impressive machine for managing the war effort of any belligerent nation. □

## The Birth of Bohemia in Paris

Luc Sante

In Jean Renoir's *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932), a bookseller rescues from the Seine an uncivilized free spirit named Boudu, who proceeds to call down chaos upon the bookseller's tidy existence. Boudu, large, hairy, and inarticulate, is a *clochard*—a word, derived from *cloche* (bell), signifying a bum or hobo. There are various theories about its etymology: that it alludes to the bell announcing the end of marketplace hours, when scavengers were free to collect unsold produce; or to when beggars rang bells to accompany their pleas; or to when the post of bell-ringer at churches was given to the neediest member of the congregation. The writer Jean-Paul Clébert supposed that the *cloche* is the sky, and all who sleep under it are its children.

A North African immigrant who became a *clochard* explained:

It's easy to become a *clochard* in Paris. One day you put on a jacket and you say, that's my shirt, and then you put on another jacket and this time you say, that's my jacket, and then you slip on a third—my overcoat. After that you go sit on the quais and you meet other guys like you, also *clochards*, and with them you smoke some butts and you drink some liters. At night you sleep under the bridges or on top of the sand heaps. When winter comes the *clochards* die like flies, because it's cold and they don't have on enough jackets, but that's how it goes. In spring others will come and the cycle will start all over again.

The *clochard* drinks and sleeps, and scrounges or begs or steals or sells junk at the flea market or sometimes takes on labor at Les Halles or on the docks. There were old and young *clochards*,

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A production in Beijing of Puccini's opera *La Bohème*, based on the novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* by Henri Murger, 1986

mostly men, some women, quite a few couples. Some were lifers, at it since they were kids. Others had had previous lives, real or imagined. This one had been a professor of philosophy, that one was retired from the Bibliothèque Nationale, another had spent forty years in the Bat' d'Af—the Bataillons d'Afrique, the disciplinary corps—and had the tattoos to prove it.

The occasional *clochard* could become a character, appreciated by a wider audience. One of these was André-Joseph Salis, known as Bibi-la-Purée (*purée* signifies, basically, “trouble”), an occasional porter, shoeshiner, artist's model, go-between, beggar, thief, and police informer, who served as boon companion to Paul Verlaine and was described as his secretary, his duties consisting chiefly of getting the poet home safely when he was blind drunk, which was often. Known for wearing unpredictable assortments of random clothes, Bibi was painted by Picasso, Théophile Steinlen, and Jacques Villon. After Verlaine's death in 1896, he made a living selling forged autographs and random found objects as having be-

longed to the poet; apparently he sold at least ten different walking sticks—“with a heavy heart”—as Verlaine's.

But then Verlaine, for all that he was the Prince of Poets (elected by his peers in 1894), edged awfully near the status of *clochard* himself, shuttling from rat hole to hospital, lying senseless on café banquettes or in doorways, saved from incarceration or death only by his friends and his prestige (allegedly, some police commissioner decreed that he was never to be arrested). In more than just his case, the distance between bohemia and the *cloche* could often seem perilously close. The name “Bohemia,” derived from the province that was believed to be the Eastern European way station of the Roma, referred to people “who lead a life without rules,” long before it enjoyed any artistic connotations. An accounting of its original compass was provided by Karl Marx in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

Vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters,

gamblers, *macquereaus* [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, *litterati*, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*.

Most of us know about the origins of bohemia, directly or indirectly, from Henri Murger, whose episodic semi-novel *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* was published serially in the late 1840s. In 1848, that year of upheaval, Murger's tales of the nobility of art spiritually triumphing over disease, poverty, and neglect must have struck a chord with people who needed an escapist fantasy version of their troubles. A working-class belletrist with no money and many afflictions—

purpura gave him a “macabre” complexion, his eyes watered incessantly—Murger wrote stories about idealized versions of his friends. The details of their setting and plot have been worn transparent from passing through so many hands over the years (Puccini's opera as well as a score of film adaptations): the quest for inspiration, the pawning of possessions, the commodity value of the black frock coat, the knell that sounds as a slight tubercular cough.

His book has both endured and faded because of its fervent, wholehearted, mulishly determined sentimentality. He branded bohemia, gave it an origin myth, tried to keep it free from radicalism and crime, made it into a sort of secular religion, all noble suffering and unjust persecution. He wrote that it was “bordered on the north by hope, work, and gaiety, on the south by necessity and courage, on the west and east by slander and the hospital.” Needless to say, he had no influence of any sort on the conduct of actual bohemians.

Artistic bohemia had already been in effect for a generation by that time. Its earliest manifestation was hatched



around 1818 by the students of Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, a painter who lived and worked in a building called Le Chilbert, on the street of that name (now Rue Bonaparte, the house razed long ago). His students moved into the building, a slum with crumbling stairs, broken windows, and sweating walls, and soon formed one of those tight, shifting, excitable, fickle, impatient, untidy coagulations of which students are uniquely capable. They seem to have been the first vanguard of Romanticism, painting landscapes directly from nature rather than from idealized classical models, accused by critics of waging “a crusade against beauty.”

They also launched, perpetrated, and squelched dozens of fads, in a way that appears to have had few precedents. There was first a medieval fad, countering the prevailing obsession with Greece and Rome, which began with them reading cheap romances and soon saw them wearing satin jerkins and gigot sleeves, carrying around lyres and short swords, and speaking in affected medievals. They even changed their names: every Jean became a Jehan, every Pierre a Petrus, every Louis a Loys. Then they were onto the Scots (via Sir Walter Scott), the modern Greeks (thanks to Byron), the Turks (by way of Lamartine’s *Méditations* and Hugo’s *Orientales*). They alternately grew their hair to their shoulders, after the English Cavaliers, and shaved it down to a stubble, after the Roundheads. At the theater they made a great show of yawning at tragedies and laughing at melodramas. “A great anxiety haunted them: everything had to be new at all costs.”

By 1830, they had split into two camps: the Bouzingsos and the Jeunes-France. The former had moved through the centuries and arrived at the Revolution of 1789: they styled their hair after Robespierre, wore waistcoats like Marat’s, boiled-leather or red felt hats, and carried cudgels. The Jeunes-France hit on the formula that Murger eventually made famous: they were dreamy, blasé, brooding, nursing vague longings and inconsolable regrets, cultivating stark white complexions, suggesting they were consumptive, turning to assorted religious affectations. The Bouzingsos then dropped the costume drama in favor of materialism and modernity: now they were all about beauty and youth, drinking and dancing all night and sleeping all day.

There were other camps, too: the Pur-Sangs, the Infatigables, the Badouillards. All of them faded away around 1838, leaving only a joint hatred of the bourgeoisie, whom they called “grocers.” The bourgeoisie, however, converted those fads into consumable objects, which were still turning up at flea markets a century and a half later:

Clocks in the shape of cathedrals, gothic bindings, letter-openers in the form of daggers, inkwells and night-lights and innumerable other objects made to look like dungeons or medieval castles with drawbridges, posterns, brattices, machicolations, watchtowers, allures...

Those cliques included former members of the cabal called the Petit-Cénacle, who had taken part in the planned set-to that accompanied the

premiere of Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* in 1830 (a battle that pitted the emerging Romantics against the entrenched Classicists): Gérard de Nerval, Théophile Gautier, Petrus Borel, Aloysius Bertrand, Jehan du Seigneur (those three had respectively been christened Pierre, Louis, and Jean), Augustus MacKeat (Auguste Macquet), Philothée O’Neddy (Théophile Dondey). On occasion they drank wine from human skulls, sometimes dispensed with clothing, gave recitals on musical instruments they did not know how to play. Nerval pitched a tent in his room, or slept on the floor next to a carved Renaissance bed he claimed to be in thrall to. Famously, he had a pet lobster named Thibault, rescued from a fishmonger’s, whom he, at least once, walked on a leash. Most of them went on to respectable careers, although in 1855 Nerval was found hanged with the belt of an apron from the grille of a cabinetmaker’s stall, wearing a hat, two shirts, two vests, and no coat, and with a tetragrammaton drawn in ink on the left side of his chest.

Murger once told Alexandre Privat d’Anglemont, “*Vous n’êtes pas un bohème, mais la bohème*”—he was bohemia itself. Privat was born in Sainte-Rose, Guadeloupe, in 1815, the son of a freewoman of color and an unknown father. His mother, who was well-to-do, sent him to be educated in Paris, but at some point her fortunes declined, leaving Privat to earn a living as a freelance writer. He returned to Point-à-Pitre only once, and stayed for just twenty-three hours—at a time when the crossing took between twenty-five and thirty-five days. His allegiance was to Paris, and until his death from tuberculosis in 1859, he virtually owned the place, although he never had much money. He wore a “style-free” overcoat in all seasons and lived indifferently in furnished rooms, but never spent much time in them anyway, since he wrote in bars and cafés and spent his days and nights walking. As his colleague Alfred Delvau wrote, “He wrote his books with his legs.” He seemingly knew everyone in the city, from clochards to Balzac, knew every saloon-keeper by name, was esteemed by all. Once when he was set upon by thieves, he exclaimed, “But I’m Privat!”

In bohemia, social mobility went both ways; an autodidact of humble background could, if he lived long enough, eventually occupy an armchair at the Académie Française, just as a rising young bourgeois could abandon his studies to become an indigent poet, subsisting on café crèmes and whatever he could collect from passing the hat. There were, naturally, many more of the latter than of the former. Notice also the pronoun. Women were affiliated with bohemia, either as accessories (such as the original of Murger’s Mimi, a lacemaker named Lucille Louvet), or as inspirations, such as Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, the only woman Verlaine included in his 1884 anthology *Les Poètes maudits*, a great visionary poet who led a life of such unrelieved misery that she became known as Our Lady of Sorrows. But women did not start to become fully accredited members of bohemia until after World War II, and even then their art often seemed to be accompanied in estimation by a hovering asterisk.

Bohemia was a kind of priesthood, demanding vows of poverty if not chastity, with a sideline in mystification. There was an institutional bohemia, exemplified by the Club des Hydropathes, founded in 1878, which became Le Chat Noir, a salon-cum-nightclub as well as a magazine, which lasted until the eve of the twentieth century. It drew tourists and rubbernecks, and is preserved in popular culture by its trademark haloed feline, designed by Steinlen, but its output and membership ran in every direction. Its contributors included Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Erik Satie, in addition to, for example, the anarchist and street fighter Jules Jouy, or Édouard Dubus, who died at age thirty of a morphine overdose in a public urinal on Place Maubert, or Jehan Rictus—né Gabriel Randon—who personified the romance of poverty and gave voice to it in his *Soliloquies of the Poor Man* (1897), written in slang.

Le Chat Noir initiated the bohemian hegira to Montmartre from the Left Bank. Montmartre was a quiet country village, atmospherically distant from the city below, with tree-lined lanes and old farmhouses and quite a few remaining windmills, when it welcomed Picasso, Apollinaire, Utrillo, Gris, and so on. They in turn drew hundreds of epigones, who irrevocably altered the place, in one of the earliest examples of an artistic vanguard paving the way for commerce and eventual gentrification. Still, the pioneers did not have an easy time of it. They were assaulted by thugs who put out the gaslights by throwing rocks; some were murdered. And many bohemians themselves wound up in jail, a consequence of their poverty, which could be extreme. Francis Carco stole milk bottles from doorsteps, stole gas from streetlights, roasted meat on the hallway gas jet, once in a restaurant dribbled gravy on the slate on which his bill was written, then called over the house dog to lick it clean. The artist André Dignimont was skilled at heisting coin machines; a poet named Georges Banneret stole photo albums from cathouses to flog the dirty pictures individually. Many, such as Modigliani, squatted in empty houses with furniture stolen from café terraces, heated with firewood stripped from the wooden pavements of the exterior boulevards.

The Montmartre bohemians had no choice but to get their clothes from the flea market, and weird clothes were cheaper because they were less in demand. They wore Rembrandt hats, cavalry trousers, sailors’ jerseys, Spanish capes, coachmen’s capes, hooded cloaks, mechanics’ jumpsuits, dusters, priests’ hats, jockeys’ caps; the women sometimes unearthed elaborate ballgowns or the short eighteenth-century jackets called *pet en l’air* (fart in the open)—it was as if they were replaying all the fads of Le Chilbert at once. Since oddball health regimes were also, almost inevitably, in effect, people went barefoot for reasons of “circulation” and wore colorful turbans that allegedly relieved headaches. Their parties were as loud and disruptive as things could get before the advent of amplified music: firecrackers, animal noises, breaking bottles, obscene songs, target practice with revolvers. As Guy Debord wrote much later: “Paris was a city so beautiful that many people preferred to be poor there than rich somewhere else.” □

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# Max Planck: The Tragic Choices

Freeman Dyson

## Planck: Driven by Vision, Broken by War

by Brandon R. Brown.  
Oxford University Press,  
258 pp., \$29.95

In the summer of 1946, as soon as possible after the end of World War II, the Royal Society of London organized a celebration for the three hundredth birthday of Isaac Newton. Newton was born on Christmas Day 1642, laid the foundations of modern physics with his masterpiece, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, in 1686, and served as president of the Royal Society from 1703 until his death in 1727. The birthday party had been postponed because of the war. Surviving in the ruins of defeated Germany were many distinguished scientists, all of them loyal to their country and many of them tainted by active collaboration with the Nazi regime. The Royal Society invited only one man to represent Germany at the celebration. The chosen representative, serving as a symbol of the glorious past and the tragic downfall of German science, was Max Planck.

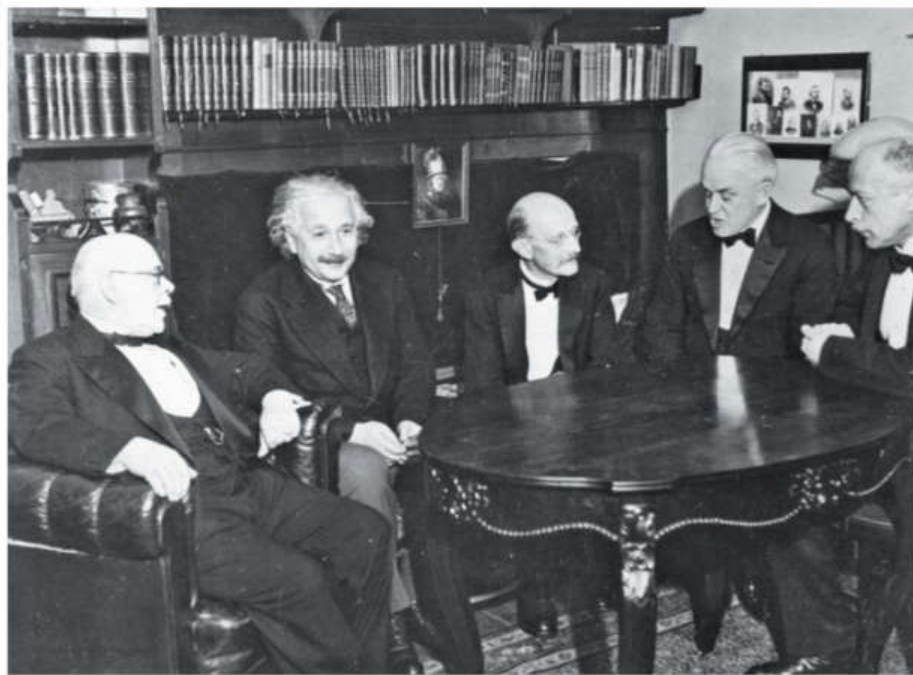
Planck was then eighty-eight years old, devoting the last years of his life to the rebuilding of German science. When he entered the auditorium at the Newton celebration, the leaders of British science gave him long and emotional applause. He had laid the foundations of quantum theory with his masterpiece, the paper "On the Theory of the Energy Distribution Law of the Normal Spectrum," in 1900, and had served as president of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, the German equivalent of the Royal Society.

In that paper he had explained the observed intensity of light of various colors emitted from the surfaces of hot objects at various temperatures. His explanation involved a new and revolutionary idea: that energy could move around only in little packets rather than continuously. The little packets were later called quanta, and Planck's idea was called quantum theory. Planck's quantum theory and Einstein's theory of relativity became the twin foundation stones on which the science of the twentieth century was built.

Besides inventing quantum theory, Planck had made another great contribution to science by welcoming and generously supporting the young Albert Einstein. In 1905, when Einstein, then an unknown employee of the Swiss patent office in Bern, sent five revolutionary papers to the physics journal that Planck edited in Berlin, Planck immediately recognized them as works of genius and published them quickly without sending them to referees. He did not agree with all of Einstein's ideas, but he published all of them. He helped Einstein to move ahead in the academic world, and in 1913 invited him to a full professorship in Berlin. For twenty years Planck and Einstein were friends and colleagues in Berlin, leaders of a scientific community that remained creative and vibrant, in spite of the political and economic disarray that surrounded them. Planck was the rock-solid central figure of German science, with the vision to promote the

unorthodox and unpatriotic citizen-of-the-world Einstein.

For Planck, loyalty to Germany always came first. The British audience at the Royal Society gave him the respect due to a defeated enemy who had fought bravely. The audience also knew that his son Erwin had been hanged by Hitler's executioners in the final days of the war in 1945. Erwin had opposed Hitler and paid for it with his life. That greatly increased the respect paid to his father. It made the old Planck a suitable symbol for a reborn Germany. It gave him a final chance to do some service



Max Planck, center, with Walther Nernst, Albert Einstein, Robert Andrews Millikan, and Max Laue, all physicists and winners of the Nobel Prize, Berlin, 1928

to his country. At the end of his life he saw German science beginning to revive in Göttingen as a result of his friendly relations with the British occupation authorities.

Once in his life, Planck had traveled to the United States. In 1909 he was invited by Columbia University to give a series of eight public lectures on recent developments in physics. He was then the most famous theoretical physicist in the world. He gave his lectures in German. In those days anyone with a serious interest in physics would understand German. A large fraction of the scientific literature was in German, and a large fraction of the American experts had studied in Germany. Michael Pupin, the professor whose name now belongs to the Columbia University physics building, probably had a hand in inviting Planck to Columbia. Pupin had been a student of the great physicist Hermann von Helmholtz in Berlin. Planck and von Helmholtz were close friends.

Planck spoke at Columbia about the broad understanding of atomic and thermodynamic processes that had been achieved in the nineteenth century, ending with the new questions raised by his own quantum theory and Einstein's relativity at the beginning of the twentieth. The audience for Planck's lectures did not dwindle, and he came home to Berlin with happy memories of American hospitality. But he had not expected to learn any new

science in America. Josiah Willard Gibbs, the only American scientist that Planck might have recognized as his intellectual equal, had died in 1903. It was evident in 1909 that Germany was far ahead of America, in dedication to pure research and in depth of understanding of science.

The two decisive dates in the German tragedy were 1914 and 1933. The origins of World War I were complicated and are still debated by historians, but there is no doubt that the war could have been avoided if the German leadership in 1914 had been wiser. The

German leaders, including the kaiser, the military, the scholars, and the scientists, were immersed in a militaristic culture that glorified the fatherland and welcomed the war. They regarded the initial quarrel between Serbia and Austria as a golden opportunity for Germany to give a good beating to its enemies Russia and France.

On October 4, 1914, soon after the war began, the scholars and scientists of Germany demonstrated their patriotic spirit by publishing an "Appeal to the Cultured People of the World," signed by ninety-three leading intellectuals. The appeal of the intellectuals declared the solidarity of German culture with the German army, specifically approving the invasion of neutral Belgium and the killing of Belgian civilians who resisted the invasion. Leading writers, artists, theologians, and scientists had been invited to sign the appeal. Among those who signed was Planck. Among those who refused was Einstein.

Einstein saw clearly in 1914 that the German obsession with national glory was insane. Planck still believed in national glory. The two remained friends. Planck played the piano and Einstein played the violin, and they loved to play together. After 1914, Planck became more deeply attached to Germany, while Einstein became more detached. Planck felt closer to his German heritage as he saw his people defeated and impoverished. Einstein felt closer to the worldwide community of Jews as he saw them attacked and endangered.

From 1914 until 1933, with help from Planck and Einstein, German science flourished while German society broke apart. Then in January 1933 everything changed. Hitler seized power and the second German tragedy began. Hitler considered himself the good soldier who almost won World War I, and the soldiers with whom he served to be undefeated. Only the politicians were defeated, mostly because they were corrupted by treacherous Jews. Hitler's dream was to fight World War I over again and this time win. Incidentally, he would get rid of the Jews and the Communists. And incidentally, he would provide jobs for the unemployed and prosperity for German industry. This dream resonated strongly with the German public after twenty years of feeble government and economic misery. Hitler won power in 1933 with solid public support, helped by a well-organized campaign of violence and intimidation.

In 1933 Planck and Einstein ended their friendship. Einstein had seen the disaster coming and made his preparations in good time. He moved to America and never again set foot in Germany. Planck stayed in Berlin and remained loyal to the fatherland, although he knew that his loyalty demanded obedience to the murderous whims of a man he despised. Einstein sent a formal notice to the Prussian Academy resigning his membership. Planck as president of the academy recorded the resignation, with a comment that Einstein had only himself to blame for it. At the same time, Planck dismissed a number of other academy members who happened to be Jewish. He was required by the new racial laws to dismiss Jews, and he did as he was told. Planck was never a member of the Nazi Party, but he never defied its cruel and crazy laws.

Only once, in May 1933, did Planck meet with Hitler face to face, to try to mitigate the damage that Hitler was doing to German science. He appealed to Hitler to keep Fritz Haber in Germany. Haber was a world-famous chemist who won a Nobel Prize for inventing the industrial process for converting nitrogen from the atmosphere into fertilizer. He was also a Jew and an intensely patriotic German. He had done important military service for the fatherland in World War I, developing the chemical weapons that German troops used effectively on the Western Front.

To keep Haber in Germany, it would be necessary for Hitler to allow him to keep several Jewish colleagues who worked for him. Hitler reacted to this suggestion with furious anger, giving Planck a firsthand view of the black hatred that gave driving force to Hitler's ambition. Planck quietly left the room. He saw that any attempt to negotiate with Hitler was futile. He continued to serve as president of the academy, helping Hitler to destroy German science by enforcing the racial laws.

Planck had one Jewish colleague whom he could protect. That was Lise Meitner, who became world-famous in 1939 when she understood the process of splitting the uranium atom discovered



by her friend Otto Hahn in Berlin. She gave the name “fission” to Hahn’s discovery. She was then living as a refugee in Sweden, having escaped from Germany in 1938. Until 1938, with the help of Planck, she was able to survive and work with Hahn in Berlin because she was an Austrian citizen.

In 1938 Hitler annexed Austria. Meitner thus became a German citizen subject to the racial laws, and Planck could no longer protect her. She had come to Berlin in 1907 as a student, had attended Planck’s lectures, and had quickly become his friend. In 1912 he gave her a job as his assistant, and afterward helped her at every stage of her career until she became the first female science professor at the University of Berlin. For thirty years she was almost a member of the Planck family, sharing their joys and sorrows. There were plenty of sorrows, as Planck lost two daughters in childbirth and a son fighting at Verdun in World War I. There were plenty of joys, as Meitner shared Planck’s love of science, his love of music, and his love of hiking in mountains.

After their enforced separation in 1938, Planck and Meitner met twice more. In 1943, with Hitler’s war grinding toward its agonizing end, Planck was able to travel to Stockholm and spend a day with his old friend. Meitner described their meeting in her memoirs. She never lost her respect and admiration for Planck. She saw him as a tragic figure, doing the best he could in a hopeless situation. In the meantime she had traveled to America and met with many of the leading nuclear physicists there, all of them heavily involved in the Manhattan Project. She met with General Leslie Groves, the leader of the project. She had no clearance to learn secret information, but she could see pretty well what was going on. From remarks that Planck made later, it is likely that Meitner shared with him some of her insights. After that, they met once more. Meitner was in London to greet him when he came to the Newton celebration in 1946. She describes this final meeting as “like a gift from heaven... the purity and integrity of his character have resisted all the years.”

Brandon Brown’s biography of Planck is arranged in a peculiar way. Each chapter begins with a brief episode from the apocalyptic final years of his life, beginning in 1943 and ending with his death in 1947. Each of these episodes is followed by a longer narrative presented as a flashback memory, describing the happier years of his youth and the triumphs of his maturity. This arrangement has the effect of emphasizing the tragedy and diminishing the achievements of his life. A more conventional arrangement would have shown him as a man who was in many ways lucky, living in a time and place where his extraordinary gifts were put to good use, giving the world new insights into the mysteries of nature. His lasting memorial is the Max Planck Institute, a great institution for the support of scientific research in Germany, carrying forward the public service to which he devoted his life.

I now turn from the details of Planck’s biography to the general issues of ethics and politics that his story raises. My Princeton colleague Albert Hirschman published in 1970 a little book with the

title *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, exploring these issues in a different perspective. Hirschman was writing as an economist about large-scale enterprises that he had seen in many countries, beginning with the railroads in Nigeria and ending with the American war in Vietnam. In each of these enterprises, gross failures were manifest, and the individuals occupying positions of responsibility had to choose between three alternative responses. Exit meant to quit the enterprise. Voice meant to stay on the job but speak out publicly for change of direction. Loyalty meant to stay on the job and give support to the continuation of failing policies. Hirschman observed that in the majority of enterprises, voice is sadly lacking. Most people choose loyalty and very few choose voice. Those who choose exit have only a small effect on the enterprise. If gross errors and injustices are to be corrected, voice must be fearless and fierce, loud enough to be heard.

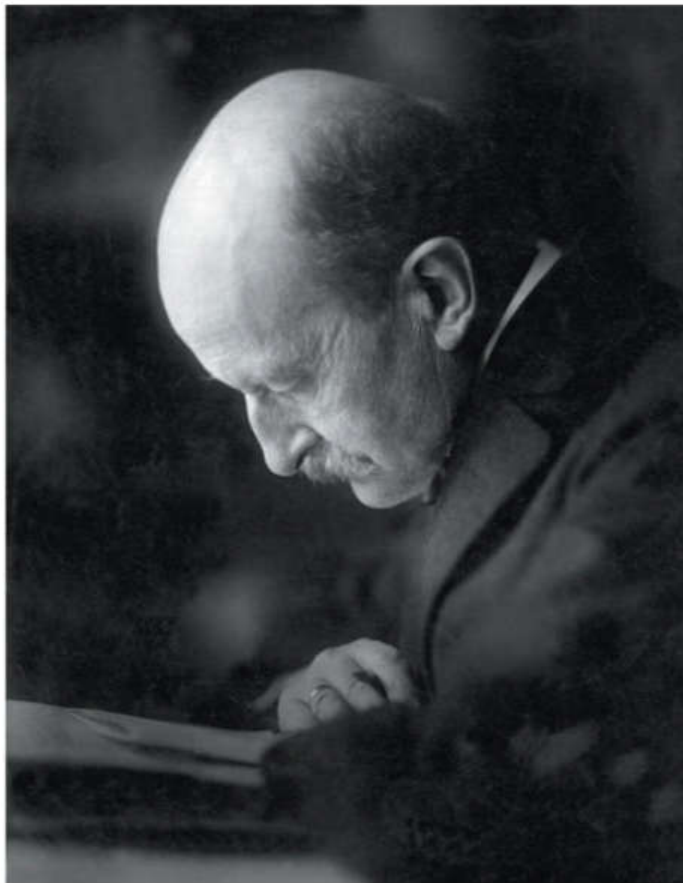
Hirschman’s picture of three choices can be applied to German society as a whole, considered as a single enterprise, during the lifetime of Planck (who was born in 1858) up to 1933. The society moved ahead rapidly in art and music and literature as well as in science. It was marred by a concentration of power in the hands of wealthy aristocrats and professional soldiers. It came to grief in 1914 because it was deluded by dreams of military glory. Until 1933, Hirschman’s three responses to the failures were available. Planck chose loyalty. Einstein chose exit when he first left Germany in 1895, and chose voice when he returned in 1914.

After 1933, Hirschman’s picture no longer applied, because open opposition to Hitler meant suicide. Voice was no longer available. It was replaced by secret resistance. In any national community with a totalitarian government, the choices are exit, resistance, and loyalty. After 1933, Planck continued to choose loyalty, Einstein chose exit, and Planck’s son Erwin chose resistance. Exit was clearly the right choice for Einstein and would have been the right choice for Erwin. For Max Planck himself, the right choice is not so clear. The story of Max is a particular example of a more general question: where to draw the line between loyalty to a community and resistance to evil. He had to choose between loyalty to Germany and resistance to Hitler. He chose loyalty. His choice and Erwin’s choice both ended badly. There is no easy solution to the dilemma when a beloved community falls into the hands of warmongers, or when it welcomes a tyrant like Hitler as a leader.

Another highly gifted man facing the same dilemma was Robert E. Lee, who had to choose between loyalty to the state of Virginia and resisting the will of his people to fight a disastrous war. Lee came through the ordeal like Planck, honored and respected by friends and enemies. Lee was fighting for the perpetuation of slavery. Planck was obeying a leader who murdered millions in concentration

camps. Our traditional warrior ethic tells us to honor people who are loyal and fight bravely for their own communities, even when the cause for which they fight is evil. Do Lee and Planck deserve the admiration that we give them? Hirschman’s book does not provide an answer to that question.

The most important example of Hirschman’s dilemma is the nuclear weapons enterprise, beginning with the discovery of fission in 1938 and continuing to the present day. This is a monstrous growth to which many talented people have devoted their lives, bringing enormous costs and dangers and achieving a precarious balance of



Max Planck, 1930

terror. The dangers were clearly foreseen by the people who started the enterprise in 1939. In 1939 they had a brief opportunity, before their national governments knew what was happening and before the barriers of secrecy were established, to respond to the dangers with a loud and public voice. If they had chosen voice in 1939, the scientists of the United States and Britain and Germany and the Soviet Union might have come to an effective agreement not to go ahead with building nuclear bombs. The opportunity was missed. Instead, the scientists chose loyalty, and were quickly trapped in an escalating arms race with no end in sight.

During the years from 1940 to 1945, secrecy prevailed everywhere and voice was not an option. During those years, Max Planck was in close contact with his friend Werner Heisenberg, who was leading the abortive German nuclear energy project. Heisenberg probably kept Planck informed about the project and invited him to participate in it. If he was invited, Planck had the wisdom to say no. So far as nuclear bombs were concerned, Planck chose exit.

It is likely that something similar happened when Meitner met with General Groves in America. Meitner was a legendary figure, one of the discoverers of fission, driven from her home in Berlin by Hitler. It is hard to imagine that she would have been attending a nuclear

conference in America if she had not been quietly invited to join the Manhattan Project. Like Planck, she chose exit and kept silent. A third European scientist of legendary status was Niels Bohr, who escaped from his home in Denmark to Sweden when the German occupation authorities in Denmark began deporting Jews. We know that Bohr was invited to join the Manhattan Project, because he accepted. He chose loyalty and was bound by the rules of secrecy that loyalty imposes.

Bohr understood that the only way to avoid an apocalyptic nuclear arms race was to establish an international authority with power to control industrial and military nuclear activities in all countries. He understood that the chance of achieving this goal would be much greater if serious discussions of nuclear issues with the Soviet Union could be started before the American bomb was built and used. He made it his mission to speak personally with President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill to urge them to move immediately in this direction; and actually succeeded in meeting privately with them.

Roosevelt received him graciously and listened politely but took no action. The meeting of Bohr with Churchill was a disaster. It was oddly like an echo of the meeting of Planck with Hitler eleven years earlier. Churchill became furiously angry. He told Bohr that the sharing of nuclear information with the Russians was a mortal crime. Bohr never had a chance to explain why secrecy could give Britain no lasting security. Churchill subsequently remarked that Bohr ought to be locked up before he gave away any more secrets.

Churchill and Hitler were in several ways similar. Both of them loved war. Both of them had dreams of empire. Both of them were bad listeners and quick to anger. Fortunately, their differences were greater than their similarities.

After 1945, the basic facts about nuclear weapons were no longer secret and voice became possible. Great scientists, beginning with Bohr and Einstein, gave powerful voice to the hope of escape from nuclear madness. Their voices did not prevail. Loyalty to our tribes prevailed. After seventy years we are left with deeply entrenched institutions and deeply entrenched beliefs, making nuclear weapons a permanent part of our way of life. To escape from this trap, some future generation must challenge our institutions and beliefs with a louder voice, blowing their trumpets and shouting with a great shout until the walls of nuclear loyalty fall down like the walls of Jericho long ago.

If we are lucky, the demolition of nuclear weaponry will be achieved peacefully, as Einstein hoped, as a consequence of a change in our way of thinking. If we are unlucky, the demolition will be achieved as a consequence of a nuclear holocaust, and our descendants will find themselves, like Max Planck at the end of his life, starting to build a new world amid the rubble of the old. This time, the rubble will be radioactive. □

ullstein bild/Getty Images



# The Bloodthirsty Deng We Didn't Know

Jonathan Mirsky

## Deng Xiaoping:

### A Revolutionary Life

By Alexander V. Pantsov  
with Steven I. Levine.  
Oxford University Press,  
610 pp., \$34.95

“Deng was... a bloody dictator who, along with Mao, was responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people, thanks to the terrible social reforms and unprecedented famine of 1958–1962.” This is the conclusion of Alexander Pantsov and Steven Levine’s biography of Deng Xiaoping, a book that, at last, shows him to be as violent and treacherous as his mentor and idol Mao Zedong. It explains, too, that Deng’s celebrated reputation as an economic reformer owes much to China’s entrepreneurial peasants, as well as to his well-read colleagues and brave lesser officials.

Like the authors’ excellent previous biography, *Mao: The Real Story* (2012), this one was first written in Russian by Pantsov and published in Moscow in 2013. Levine translated, edited, and shortened the text. He made some additions as well. The book is based on official sources from China, the Soviet Union, Western Europe, and the United States; the memoirs of Deng’s relatives, friends, and colleagues, like his bodyguard, and interviews with some of them. It includes what Pantsov learned while visiting Deng’s birthplace and interviewing Chinese who were in Tiananmen Square during the attack in June 1989. The mountain of Soviet archival materials, like the ones for the authors’ Mao biography, has never been used before and owes its use here to Pantsov’s good relations with the Russian archivists. In a personal communication, he told me:

In addition to personal stuff about Deng, his two wives, his uncle, Zhou, Mao and others, I used dispatches of Russian diplomats who worked in the Russian embassies in Beijing and Washington DC.

There are previous biographies of Deng, including one by Richard Evans, once Britain’s ambassador to Beijing, and, most notably, the recent one by Ezra Vogel, which devotes only one quarter of its length to Deng’s life—he was born in 1904—before he approached supreme power after Mao’s death in 1976.<sup>1</sup> Vogel says of Deng that he

gave great attention to gaining the cooperation and support of the people in the region. In speeches and articles in the press, Deng explained Communist rule to local government officials and the people.... Deng was praised by Mao for his success in land reform by attacking landlords, killing some of the landlords with the largest holdings, allocating their land to peas-



Deng Xiaoping at a military parade, September 1981

ants, and mobilizing local peasants to support the new leadership.

This is an example of how previous biographers skirt or avoid plain statements, like the one quoted above that Deng was responsible for the death of innocent millions. Yet even Pantsov and Levine contend (as does Vogel) that “Deng was definitely an outstanding revolutionary leader, a great economic and social reformer,” and “a talented strategist” and political organizer, a combination of qualities one would not readily apply to Hitler or Stalin. They leave the impression that one set of characteristics somehow balances the other.

I noted this same balance in the authors’ biography of Mao, which also uses hitherto unexamined Soviet sources. There they write: “An irrepressible lust for violence... was never extinguished in Mao.... All his life Mao believed in the false formula that ‘without destruction there can be no creation....’” During 1966 when Red Guards were beginning the slaughter of Mao’s enemies, he lounged around his pool “in the company of pretty seventeen- and eighteen-year-old girls.”

In their epilogue Pantsov and Levine say, one would have thought inarguably, “Mao’s crimes against humanity are no less terrible than the evil deeds of Stalin and other twentieth-century dictators. The scale of his crimes was even greater.” But then they assert about Mao:

No less suspicious or perfidious than Stalin, still he was not as

merciless.... Moreover, Mao did not take revenge on his former enemies [and] sincerely attempted to refashion the way of life and consciousness of millions of people.... The scale of his life was too grand to be reduced to a single meaning.... The achievements of Mao Zedong [which they list] are indisputable. So are his errors and crimes.

Many informed readers will be familiar with much of the narrative in the new biography of Deng. The significant exceptions are what happened in southwest China, including Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Tibet, where he was a political and military leader; and the events in Moscow in 1956 when Deng and his colleagues debated their Russian counterparts and put forward their opposing views of Khrushchev’s devastating attack on the dead Stalin, which Mao unsurprisingly found threatening to his own cult of personality. The Chinese delegation did not hear Khrushchev’s actual words, and were astounded when they were informed afterward by their hosts of the Soviet leader’s main points; they could read the text of the speech only when it was published in the West.

While Deng’s entire story is a fascinating one, I will emphasize his bloodthirstiness, which seems to me his main characteristic from 1950 on. What we see until he was almost fifty is the cherished son of a well-off peasant father who was also a patriot determined to rid China of its Manchu conquerors.

For many years he was content to worship Mao, to whom he gradually grew close, and Deng sided with him early in Mao’s career when he had not yet become the supreme leader. During that period, Mao was subordinate to Zhou Enlai. It was this loyalty that Mao remembered, even when he was purging Deng at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, so that while Deng and Zhuo Lin, his devoted third wife, were reviled, spat on, and beaten up by Red Guards, separated from their children, and banished to factory work far from Beijing, the authors show that not only was Deng’s life never in danger, he kept his Party membership and official pay, and after two years was called back to the capital and restored to high rank.

During his entire career, moreover, he learned from Mao that very few comrades were invaluable, and that to further Mao’s frequently changeable aims, any person as well as masses of ordinary people could be sacrificed and, much later, might be “rehabilitated.” Deng was to do this, too, usually with some excuse for why the rehabilitation had become necessary.

The great point here is that although Deng was regarded as amiable and loyal early in his career, as Pantsov puts it,

such fundamental virtues as human dignity, pride, and principle meant nothing to him. They had ceased to exist for him from the time of his youth, when he cast in his lot with the communist movement.... A hypocritical fickleness became a part of his character during the long years of his political life. It is not astonishing that Mao considered him a great talent.

Pantsov elaborated on this point in an e-mail he sent me:

In part, I found from former secret reports that Deng was not a member of Zhou Enlai’s group, but he had his own military faction that simply collaborated with Zhou’s men in the government against the Gang of Four.... We can better understand Deng as a politician and a person. He did not care about Zhou, he just used him.

This challenges a conventional view. Both abroad and in China, Deng has been considered an ally of Zhou, a moderate pragmatist who tried to curb the disasters of the Cultural Revolution. Pantsov shows that intraparty struggle between various factions in China was more complicated than we knew.

It is this sort of accurate observation, which is frequent in the new biography, that causes me to smile when the authors emphasize, “We do not explicitly praise or blame Deng, just as we did not explicitly praise or blame Mao. But they also say this of Deng: ‘He believed in the Great Helmsman as in God and blindly subordinated himself to Mao.’”

How this belief came about is puzzling. Deng grew up valued as the

<sup>1</sup>Richard Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China* (Viking, 1994); Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2011).



first-born son. Pantsov visited the large comfortable family home, where the guide told him at least one lie. Even when Deng was a very short young man living abroad there was no sign of the kind of the ruthless person he would become. During his time in France, where he went in 1920 to participate in radical, but not Communist, politics, he worked in factories and offices, where, known as “Mr. Mimeograph,” he seemed most at ease listening, taking notes, and staying in the background. But he felt ignored in “a society that had no place for him,” and while innocent of Marxist theory moved increasingly to the left.

From 1923 on, now under the influence of Zhou, who had also gone to France, Deng “devoted himself to dangerous Bolshevik work,” and in 1925 entered the European branch of the Chinese Communist Party. The dangerous work included publishing anticapitalist articles, organizing demonstrations outside places of work, and distributing propaganda materials. He “wrote a letter to his father and mother terminating his relationship with them.” Indeed, he never returned to his birthplace although many years later in China, when he had become a powerful Party official, he cared for a number of other relatives.

In 1926, while continuing his Bolshevik education in Moscow, Deng buckled down to reading Marxist and Soviet texts, absorbing “new material like a sponge.” He wrote at the time, “From now on I shall wholeheartedly accept party education, submit myself to party leadership, and unfailingly fight for the interests of the proletariat.” During Soviet inner-Party struggles it was drilled into him “that it was forbidden to speak about democracy in a party that was engaged in a single-minded struggle for the victory of the revolution.” His evaluation in Soviet records read: “He has no non-Party tendencies... [he] pays great attention to the Party’s discipline.” It was recommended that Deng was best suited to propaganda and “organizational work,” which was to be the case for years to come when he returned to China in 1927.

It was in that year, sitting in a corner and taking notes at a meeting in Hankou of the tiny Central Committee, that Deng saw the thirty-four-year-old Mao Zedong for the first time. Mao said later that he did not remember Deng at that meeting, but soon he would “become a person of some significance, at least in underground circles.” Later his colleagues remembered Deng as “a tireless chatterbox, cracking jokes and telling stories.” He married his first wife, a beautiful young woman who soon died in childbirth, and although “a prodigal and eternally ungrateful son,” accepted money from his father.

In 1929, he was sent to southwest Guangxi province, where most of the non-Chinese peasants hated Hans. Pantsov observes that this probably baffled Deng, who found that calls for “brotherhood” for all the oppressed in the region were meaningless, owing to the “close bonds” between peasants and landlords. In 1931, after the failure of an uprising against the Nationalists, in which Deng had a leading part, he left for Shanghai to report to the Central Committee. During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards accused him of cowardice. He would admit that what

he did “was one of the worst mistakes of my life” but immediately added, after admitting errors, that his action was “lawful in an organizational sense.”

In 1931, at a Party conference, Mao was condemned for “kulak deviation” and military failures. He was also accused of “right deviationism,” and Deng too was attacked, not only for defending Mao, but for mistakes in conducting guerrilla warfare. Deng wrote successive self-criticisms to the same critics, realizing, as Pantsov puts it, that “it was better to ‘lose face’ several times than to lose your head once.” Although Deng lost his post as director of the Propaganda Department, he was not expelled from the Party. But his second wife abandoned him and married Deng’s “worst enemy,” Li Weihan. As Pantsov observes, for both Deng and his second wife “the revolution trumped love.” By now he had gained the favorable attention of Mao, who appreciated that Deng had been named along with himself as a “criminal.”

In 1934, defeated by the Nationalists, the Red Army—most of whose members would perish along the way—set out on the Long March, during which Mao would assume supreme power at a meeting at Zunyi, where, as he often did, “Deng sat in the corner and diligently took minutes.” Mao had become his “main teacher and protector,” and Deng “would gaze up at Mao from below.”

Not evidently ambitious but making strides upward, Deng was promoted to positions of leadership in propaganda and educational activities in the army and, as noted above, was regarded as good fun by his comrades. By 1937 he had ascended to the leading group at Mao’s headquarters at Yanan. But the Deng who would soon be feared as well as respected had yet to emerge.

This would happen after his elevation in January 1938 to commissar of an army division in the southwest, serving General Lin Bocheng, one of Mao’s best commanders. Here much of the source material is new. “It was his finest hour,” according to Pantsov and Levine. Deng was “now a regional militarist with enormous military power concentrated in his hands.” Evans Carlson, President Roosevelt’s unofficial representative in the region, described him as “short, chunky, and physically tough, and his mind was as keen as mustard.” This was only the first of the many times that Deng would impress, even awe, Americans who met him, as he did Henry Kissinger and President Jimmy Carter.

Liu Bocheng and Deng’s army achieved unusual successes after the beginning of the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, when Mao was forced out of his Yanan stronghold. It was during this time, also, that according to the authors, Deng urged “the poor peasants, rural riffraff and paupers against the wealthy landowners, to organize village meetings at which they compelled them to ‘settle accounts’ with ‘the exploiters,’ to expropriate the land from those labeled landlords, and redistribute it equally.” He was, they write, apparently unaware that in his region “as generally in North China, peasant holdings were the norm and landlords few.”

A new Deng emerged. Because of his association with General Liu he had become such a skilled soldier that “staff officers sought his directives with regard to all operational matters.” He was now “feared” by his colleagues as well as respected, and “extremely demanding of all his subordinates and merciless toward those who violated discipline.” It was the final Maoist lesson for the “little fellow over there,” as Mao would describe him to Khrushchev, and a foretaste of his power to come.

In 1950, after many warnings to the Tibetans not to resist, the army from the southwest, where Deng was first secretary, crossed into Tibet, killing 5,700 defenders. Deng did not participate in this invasion. Pleas for support from the Dalai Lama’s government to the UN, US, UK, and India went unan-

Deng Xiaoping



swered, the beginning of what would be decades of silence from the West about Beijing’s acts in Tibet.

The vast area of the “Southwest Bureau” for which Deng was responsible, which now included Tibet, was a diverse one inhabited by what Pantsov calls many “tribes,” some of which practiced “cannibalism.” But also in that region were 90,000 remnants of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist army. Beijing ordered that these “bandits” and “counterrevolutionaries” be suppressed, leading, in Pantsov’s words, to “an orgy of executions,” Deng’s first, but by no means last. From November 1950 to April 1951, an average of forty-six people were executed daily, justified by Deng in a report to Mao as the elimination of “spies, landlords, or other bad elements.” Even Mao was disturbed by this toll and recommended that the “daily norm” be reduced to nine or ten.

It is difficult to estimate the numbers executed during such campaigns. Frank Dikötter, in his *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957* (2013), has claimed death figures in the millions for all China, not all at Deng’s hands; Pantsov’s estimates are lower although still large. Deng, ever closer to Mao, does not, from their account, seem to have been troubled about subsequent deaths of millions during the Mao-induced famine of 1958–1962.

The Tiananmen violence of June 3 and 4, 1989, is concisely described in the new biography, with the killings wrongly described as beginning in the afternoon of June 3, when they actually began late that night. It is curious that

Pantsov and Levine do not nail down Deng’s role—he was now “Senior Leader”—in what they estimate were hundreds to a few thousand deaths, although they show his mounting rage with what was going on in the center of Beijing. They could have been specific. In *The Tiananmen Papers* for June 2, which Pantsov and Levine cite, Deng, urged on by most of the other “Elders,” says these fatal words:

I... suggest the martial law troops begin tonight to carry out the clearing plan and finish it within two days.... If they [citizens and students] refuse to leave, they will be responsible for the consequences.<sup>2</sup>

It was disgusting in late 1989 to see and hear Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to George Bush, grasp

Deng’s hand and tell him, “My president wants you to know he is your friend forever.”

Pantsov and Levine show also, in more detail than other studies, Deng’s enthusiasm for economic reforms, which are often cited as a way of avoiding final judgments on his violence. China’s peasants began reforming their practices after Mao’s death, sometimes, Pantsov writes, in very small villages. At the same time, some Chinese, like Su Shaozhi—who later fled to the US—were also influenced by Stalin’s victim Nikolai Bukharin. They urged that freeing the peasants would lead to prosperity. It is true, of course, that Deng, who always admitted he was no theoretician, approved greater free-

dom for peasants, whose incomes rose in the late 1980s, although the income gap between them and ever-richer urban workers, whom he also encouraged, has widened.

I have emphasized that both Deng’s cruelty to those around him and his violence on a large scale when it suited him were legacies of the Mao Zedong he idolized. And it is precisely those merciless qualities that dominate the narrative of Pantsov and Levine. Deng was indeed a “bloody dictator who, along with Mao, was responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people.” That huge fact is what distinguishes this unique, comprehensively documented, and frightening biography. Nonetheless, clever Chinese students at Oxford, Cambridge, and the LSE, and no doubt at American universities, often insist that Deng was even greater than Mao, while insisting, too, that Tiananmen was a riot in which, as some have said, “our police and soldiers” were attacked. When this book is published in the West and smuggled into China, some of them may change their minds.

As Pantsov and Levine hopefully conclude:

When the concepts of freedom and civil rights will some day be embraced by most Chinese, the new generation of Chinese people will definitely find a more appropriate place for Deng Xiaoping in their long and torturous history.

<sup>2</sup>*The Tiananmen Papers*, compiled by Zhang Liang, edited by Andrew Nathan and Perry Link (Little, Brown, 2001), p. 362.



# The Very Great Alexander von Humboldt

Nathaniel Rich

## **The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World**

by Andrea Wulf.  
Knopf, 473 pp., \$30.00

## **After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene**

by Jedediah Purdy.  
Harvard University Press,  
326 pp., \$29.95

Humboldt's hog-nosed skunk, the Humboldt penguin, the Humboldt squid, and more than a hundred other animal species; Humboldt's Lily, Humboldt's Schomburgkia, and three hundred other plant species; the minerals *Humboldtite*, *Humboldtite*, and *Humboldtite*; Humboldt Limestone, Humboldt Oolite, the Humboldt Formation, the Humboldt Current; Humboldt Redwoods State Park, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt; Mont Humboldt, Humboldt Mountain, Humboldt Peak, and Humboldt ranges in China, South Africa, and Antarctica; Humboldt Falls, Humboldt Glacier, Humboldt Bay, the Humboldt River, the Humboldt Sink, the Humboldt Salt Marsh; four Humboldt counties and thirteen Humboldt towns in North America alone, the Humboldt crater and Mare Humboldtianum on the moon, and asteroid 54 Alexandra, orbiting the sun.

The Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) is all around us. Yet he is invisible. “Alexander von Humboldt has been largely forgotten in the English-speaking world,” writes Andrea Wulf in her thrilling new biography. “It is almost as though his ideas have become so manifest that the man behind them has disappeared.” Wulf's book is as much a history of those ideas as it is of the man. The man may be lost but his ideas have never been more alive.

Humboldt's legacy appeared certain at the time of his death, when he was the most famous scientist in the world. His funeral in Berlin was the grandest ever accorded to a private German individual; a procession of tens of thousands of mourners followed for a mile behind his hearse, pulled by the king's horses. American newspapers eulogized him as the “most remarkable man ever born” and lamented the end of the “age of Humboldt.” His portrait hung on the walls of state buildings from London to Bangkok.

A decade later, on the centennial of Humboldt's birth, parades, concerts, and firework shows were held in Moscow, Alexandria, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Melbourne, and dozens of American cities. Fifteen thousand marched in Syracuse, President Ulysses Grant joined a huge celebration in Pittsburgh, and 25,000 assembled in Central Park, in the midst of a euphoric citywide bonanza. *The New York Times* devoted its entire front page to the global festivities.

Times changed. Anti-German sentiment after World War I, the specialization and Balkanization of the sciences, and the passage of time conspired to dilute Humboldt's public standing, particularly in the United States. He was eclipsed by devoted disciples—among



Alexander von Humboldt, 1803

them Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, Ernst Haeckel, and John Muir—who developed his insights in new ways. But times have changed again. In our Anthropocene age Humboldt's theories read like prophecy. More important, they offer wisdom about the way forward. It is impossible to read *The Invention of Nature* without contracting Humboldt fever. Wulf makes Humboltians of us all.

Humboldt was born during the era in which human beings stopped fearing nature and began to control it. The steam engine, the smallpox vaccine, and the lightning rod were rapidly redefining man's relationship with the natural world. Timekeeping and measuring systems became standardized, and the few blank spaces remaining on world maps were quickly filling in. In New England, the colonists spoke of “reclaiming” North America from the wilderness, a project inextricable from the propagation of democracy. The jurist James Kent, seeking a legal basis for seizing land from Native Americans, argued that the continent was “fitted and intended by Providence to be subdued and cultivated, and to become the residence of civilized nations.” Explorers like James Cook and Louis Antoine de Bougainville circumnavigated the globe and published their journals, which Humboldt read avidly as a boy.

Humboldt's father was a chamberlain in the Prussian court and a confidant to the future king, who was godfather to Humboldt; his mother, the daughter of

a wealthy manufacturer and member of the Prussian civil service, was of Huguenot descent. Alexander and his older brother Wilhelm spent winters in Berlin and summers at the family castle in Tegel but their childhoods were lonely. Their father died when Alexander was nine and their mother was severe and cold. Though the brothers were close, and remained so their entire lives—Wilhelm would become a linguist and philosopher—their only companions were the private tutors who gave them a rigorous education in the classics.

Humboldt was desperate to escape this claustrophobic environment but afraid to abandon his mother. “There is a drive in me,” he wrote in a letter, “that often makes me feel as if I'm losing my mind.” He likened this drive to being chased perpetually by “10,000 pigs.” After university he became an inspector in the Ministry of Mines, a job that satisfied his mother's desire for him to ascend the ranks of the Prussian civil service, while allowing him to travel widely across the kingdom and conduct personal experiments in geology, anatomy, and electricity. It was not until his mother's death of cancer in 1796, when he was twenty-seven, that he felt free. He did not attend her funeral.

Supported by the windfall of his inheritance, he abandoned his mining career and planned a “great voyage” to a distant location. The destination did not seem to make much difference—he considered the West Indies, Lapland, Greece, and Siberia, before settling on South America, once he was offered a passport to the Spanish colonies from King Carlos IV himself. Nor did he

have any specific object of study. He would analyze everything, from wind patterns and cloud structures to insect behavior and soil composition, collecting specimens, making measurements, and taking temperatures. He wanted no less than to discover how “all forces of nature are interlaced and interwoven.” He took as the premise of his expedition that the earth was “one great living organism where everything was connected.” The insights that followed from this premise would be worth more than all of the discoveries he made.

This is not to discount the value of those discoveries, which were later collected in his thirty-four-volume *Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, published between 1807 and 1826. On his voyage Humboldt explored Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, visiting many regions never before observed by a scientist. He identified two thousand new plant species at a time when only six thousand species were known. (More plants, animals, minerals, and places are named after Humboldt than anyone else.) He discovered the magnetic equator. He was the first European to explore and map the Casiquiare River, the only natural canal on earth to link two major river systems, the Orinoco and the Amazon. He was the first to conduct experiments on electric eels, which he dissected and held in his hands, enduring violent shocks.

Humboldt carried this kind of hands-on experimentation to manic extremes in his voracious quest for total knowledge. He drank river water (the Orinoco was particularly disgusting, while the Atabapo was “delicious”), chewed bark, copied and translated scientific manuscripts, made astronomical observations, gauged the blueness of the sky with a cyanometer, transcribed the vocabularies of indigenous tribes, and sketched Incan monuments and hieroglyphs of ancient civilizations deep in the Amazonian rainforest. He studied his own lice with a microscope.

At times *The Invention of Nature* reads like pulp explorer fiction, a genre at least partially inspired by Humboldt's own travelogues. On the Chimborazo volcano, 17,000 feet above sea level, we find Humboldt crawling along a two-inch-wide ridge between a sheer icy cliff and a thousand-foot drop with “almost perpendicular walls... covered with rocks that protruded like knife blades.” Humboldt bathes in the Orinoco among crocodiles, gigantic boa constrictors, herds of capybaras, and jaguars. He contracts fevers, dysentery, blood infections, and nameless horrific Amazonian diseases. With his companion, the naturalist Aimé Bonpland, he scales every peak he can see in the Andes. When his shoes disintegrate, he continues barefoot. While traveling from Cuba to the Atlantic seaboard he sails straight into a hurricane, which lingers overhead for six days, inundating the ship so that the passengers must swim through the captain's cabin, while sharks circle in the turbid waters.

Wulf, a design historian at the Royal College of Art in London and the



author of two histories of gardening, seems liberated to have exited the garden. She has gone to near-Humboldtian lengths to research her book: traversing the Venezuelan rainforest, walking around Walden Pond “in deep freshly fallen snow,” hiking in Yosemite, and even climbing Chimborazo. She visited archives in California, Berlin, and Cambridge, where she read Humboldt’s dozens of books in German, Darwin’s copies of Humboldt’s books, and his personal files. (Humboldt, as manic in his correspondence as in all else, wrote more than 50,000 letters and received more than twice as many.) Wulf sought out, 12,000 feet high on Ecuador’s Antisana volcano, the dilapidated hut where Humboldt spent a night in 1802, and in Quito she found his original Spanish passport.

Rediscovering Humboldt is by this point a subgenre unto itself—recent entrants include *Humboldt’s Cosmos* (2004) by Gerard Helferich, Laura Dassow Walls’s *The Passage to Cosmos* (2011), and Aaron Sachs’s valuable *The Humboldt Current* (2006), which traces Humboldt’s influence on American environmental thought. But Wulf offers a more urgent argument for Humboldt’s relevance. The Humboldt in these pages is bracingly contemporary; he acts and speaks in the way that a polyglot intellectual from the year 2015 might, were he transported two centuries into the past and set out to enlighten the world’s benighted scientists and political rulers.

After his five-year voyage through Latin America, Humboldt landed in the United States in May 1804. He spent a week in Washington, regaling President Jefferson, Secretary of State James Madison, and Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin with information about the Spanish colonies, which to that point had largely been closed to American contact. Jefferson was then in a border dispute with Spain over the land between the Sabine and Rio Grande rivers. Humboldt convinced Jefferson that the land—today the state of Texas—despite its deserts and savanna, was worth fighting for. “We have little knowledge” of the Spanish colonies, a grateful Jefferson told Humboldt, “but through you.”

Humboldt settled in Paris, where he set to writing and lecturing about his voyage. He skipped meals and barely slept. His hand couldn’t keep up with his brain: he crammed the margins of his handwritten pages with ideas for other chapters and essays. When he ran out of space, he continued to write on his desk itself, carving his thoughts into the wood. He delivered a series of widely attended talks at the Académie des Sciences, in which he “jumped so quickly from one subject to another that nobody could keep up.” The Jardin des Plantes exhibited some of his botanical specimens, but not all: he had brought back 60,000. His maps, political essays about the colonies, and the data he collected about agriculture, manufacturing, geology, botany, zoology, fluviology, and meteorology revolutionized each of those fields.

He met often with politicians, scientists (including Georges Cuvier and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck), and the aristocracy. He appears to have been nearly universally adored, with one exception. “Napoleon,” wrote Humboldt, “hates me.” Wulf suggests that Napoleon might have envied Hum-

boldt’s success. *Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* was published at nearly the same time as Napoleon’s *Description de l’Égypte*, a twenty-three-volume study compiled by two hundred scientists who had accompanied Napoleon’s troops during the 1798 invasion of Egypt. Humboldt had achieved more on his own.

Humboldt’s most consequential findings, however, derived from his conception of the world as a single unified organism. “Everything,” he said, “is interaction and reciprocal.” It seems commonplace today to speak of “the web of life,” but the concept was Humboldt’s invention. Into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thinkers like René Descartes, Francis Bacon, and

“perpetual interrelationship” between land, ocean, wind, elevation, and organic life. He introduced the idea of classifying plants by climate zones instead of taxonomy, taking into account altitude, temperature, and other conditions related to location. He invented isotherms, the lines used on maps to connect regions with the same average temperature and atmospheric pressure. The similarity of the coastal plants in Africa and South America led him to postulate an “ancient” connection between the continents, anticipating plate tectonic theory by more than a century. He also studied how different systems interacted with one another. Nobody before Humboldt, for instance, had been able to explain how forests, by releasing oxygen, storing water, and providing shade, have a cooling effect on climate.



Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland collecting plants at the foot of Chimborazo in today's Ecuador; aquatint from Humboldt's *Vue des Cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique*, 1810–1813

Carl Linnaeus were still echoing Aristotle’s view that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man.”

Particularly heterodox was the implication that the decline of one species might have cascading effects on others. The possibility that animal life might not be inexhaustible had been proposed by the German anatomist J.F. Blumenbach (who taught Humboldt at the University of Göttingen), but was not widely accepted. “Such is the economy of nature, that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct,” declared Thomas Jefferson in 1784, an opinion shared by most naturalists. Convinced to the end of his life that mastodons still existed in North America, most likely in the “unexplored and undisturbed” regions of the continent, Jefferson urged Lewis and Clark to look for them during their expedition.

Humboldt traveled so far, saw so much, and observed so closely that he began to notice similarities across continents. Rhododendron-like plants on the mountains near Caracas reminded him of alpine trees in the Swiss Alps; a sea of cacti, seen from the distance, recalled the grasses in the marshes of northern Europe; a moss in the Andes resembled a species he had found growing in German forests.

This comparative approach allowed him to take staggering intellectual leaps. He looked beyond the characteristics of organisms and tried to determine the structures underlying nature, leading him to formulate the idea of ecosystems. He was the first to understand that climate emerged from the

In the Llanos, the vast grasslands that stretch from the Andes to the Amazon River, Humboldt noticed with wonder how many species found food or protection from the occasional Mauritia palm tree. It sheltered insects and worms from the wind, provided fruit to monkeys and birds, retained moisture and soil, and generally spread “life around it in the desert.” The Mauritia palm was what, two centuries later, would come to be known as a “keystone species,” an organism on which the health of an entire ecosystem depends.

If everything in nature interacted, then it stood to reason that the natural world was not stable but prone to dynamic changes. It followed that man, by disrupting the natural order, might inadvertently bring about catastrophe. Humboldt was among the first to write of the perils of deforestation, irrigation, and cash crop agriculture, asserting that the brutal repercussions of man’s “insatiable avarice” were already “incalculable.” During his yearlong expedition to Russia in 1829, he gave a speech at the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg calling for a vast international collaboration in which scientists around the world would collect data related to the effects of deforestation, the first global study of man’s impact on climate, and a model for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, assembled 160 years later.

The idea that human beings might be interfering with the natural order of things was a radical rejection of prevailing views about man’s dominion

over nature. These views were most forcefully expressed by the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, who wrote with disgust of primeval nature; his *Natural History* is replete with words like “grotesque,” “filth,” “nauseous,” “pestilential,” and “terrible.” Buffon’s views were echoed by William Bradford, the first governor of the Plymouth Colony, who described the new world as “a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men,” and the English naturalist John Ray, who wrote of man’s duty to bring nature in line with God’s design through settlement and cultivation. To Humboldt, however, man was “nothing” in the larger scheme of things. Wulf notes that nowhere in his five-volume magnum opus, *Cosmos*—his attempt to summarize his thinking on the natural world, the universe, and the entirety of human history—does Humboldt mention God.

By casting aside religious and political ideology, Humboldt was able to diagnose plainly the cruelties of colonial rule. The sight of the slave markets in the Spanish colonies made him a fervent abolitionist. He told Americans (though not Jefferson himself) that slavery was a “disgrace” and that the oppression of Native Americans was a “stain” on the nation. Humboldt was the first to make the correlation between colonialism, with its crude emphasis on extracting resources and disregard for indigenous populations, and ecological devastation.

Humboldt wrote figuratively, with high emotion, of the beauty he found in wilderness. Wulf calls his rhapsodic *Views of Nature* “a blueprint for much of nature writing today.” Just as his scientific views influenced Darwin and Marsh (who warned in *Man and Nature* that “climatic excess” might lead to the “extinction of the [human] species”), Humboldt’s lyricism served as a model for Thoreau, Haeckel, and Muir. Wulf dedicates a chapter to each of these figures, all of whom idolized Humboldt and drew liberally from his work.

Darwin stands out as the most slavish of his acolytes, writing in his journal that Humboldt “like another Sun illumines everything I behold.” Darwin wrote that it was Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative*, a seven-volume subsection of *Voyage*, that inspired him “to travel in distant countries, and led me to volunteer as naturalist in her Majesty’s ship Beagle.” He brought his copy of the *Personal Narrative* on the Beagle with him and read in it Humboldt’s discussion of the “gradual transformations of species.” Humboldt wrote that plants and animals “limit each other’s numbers” through “long continued contest” for nourishment and territory, with only the strongest surviving—an idea, Wulf notes with some understatement, “That would become essential to Darwin’s concept of natural selection.” Wulf also points out that the final, crowning paragraph of *Origin of Species* is a nearly verbatim plagiarism of a passage in *Personal Narrative*.

Humboldt also exerted a profound influence on Goethe (with whom he had a deep friendship), Charles Lyell, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jules Verne, Carl Friedrich Gauss, Flaubert, Pushkin, Emerson, Poe, Whitman, Aldous Huxley, Ezra Pound, Erich Fried, Justus Liebig,



James Lovelock, and Rachel Carson, yet Humboldt makes only a passing appearance in Jedediah Purdy's otherwise instructive *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Purdy, a professor of law at Duke, sets out to do two things in his monograph. He first charts the history of modern man's relationship to the natural world, focusing on the American perspective—a recapitulation of Roderick Nash's classic *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) and William Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness" (1995).

Second, and more ambitiously, Purdy attempts to imagine a political system that might be capable of addressing the urgent, existential questions posed by our current environmental crisis. That we need a new way to think about the natural world is indisputable: despite best intentions and righteous rhetoric, global carbon emissions continue to rise precipitously. Naomi Klein and others have argued persuasively that capitalist democracies are uniquely incapable of resolving these problems. Authoritarian governments have fared worse. What is to be done?

Purdy defers those questions in the first four fifths of his book, which he devotes to his American history of "nature"—a concept that "has been a vessel for many inconsistent ideas." His survey begins with John Evelyn, John Ray, and the argument that man had a providential duty to transform wilderness—originally a pejorative term, synonymous with "waste"—into orderly agricultural plots. Land cultivation was codified in colonial law, which "deployed Americans as an army of development...through a scheme of

opportunity and reward." Claiming land from nature, and exploiting it for profit, was enshrined as a foundational American right—a view that persists to this day.

It was not until John Muir ("How intensely I desire to be a Humboldt") popularized Thoreau's romantic views of the natural world that Americans began in large numbers to see wilderness as a spiritual and meditative refuge from the bustle of modern life. But this idealization of nature was counterproductive, protecting "a few cathedrals" like Yosemite and Yellowstone while devaluing the more pedestrian swathes of nature that made up most of the continent. The preservation movement was eclipsed by the more pragmatic conservation movement. Figures like Theodore Roosevelt, Walter Weyl, an editor of *The New Republic*, and Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the United States Forest Service, proposed a bureaucratic, utilitarian approach, designed to ensure that the natural world was accessible for both recreation and the extraction of resources. But when these two interests came into conflict, preservationists lost—most notably in the battle over the Tuolumne River in Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley, dammed in 1923 to provide water to San Francisco.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the politics of nature evolved to reflect a growing (Humboldtian) awareness of ecology. Concerns over air and water pollution, land development, resource extraction, species extinction, drought, wildfires, and even roadside littering were consolidated under the single rubric of "the environment." "Once invented," writes Purdy, "the environ-

mental crisis could encompass many crises." This view still dominates environmental politics, though it has been complicated by a new appreciation of the profound ways in which man has reconfigured the natural world to our own specifications. In political calculations about the environmental crisis, romantic appeals to nature's glory have been supplanted by a rigid cost-benefit analysis. Echoes of the Hetch Hetchy debate can be seen in the battle over the Keystone Pipeline, new EPA methane and carbon dioxide emission regulations, and drilling in the Arctic Circle.

In his final chapters, Purdy identifies the familiar challenges we face. He explains, for instance, why cost-benefit analysis breaks down when applied to the climate: the cost of meaningful, long-term change will fall heavily on the people trying to solve the problem, while the benefits will be reaped by generations not yet born. Concerns over hotter summers may trouble consciences but they don't stop people from driving cars.

Purdy proposes that we have a moral obligation to the natural world and that "a clean environment...should not be negotiable in terms of the marginal dollar." He argues that our democracy is too beholden to the influence of money, that the processes we use to produce energy and food should be made more transparent to the public, and that technological solutions are unreliable and will not bring about the greater change of consciousness that is necessary to solve our most pressing problems. He urges an ethic of self-

restraint and a new worldview in which human beings are no longer "the figure at its center." Most environmentalists already share these views.

Purdy is slightly more audacious in his suggestion that we must think with greater imagination about our relationship to the natural world. It is crucial, he writes, that we imagine "alternative landscapes, alternative economies, alternative ways of living." More specifically, he proposes that we embrace "an aesthetics of damage," defined as "a way of living with harm and not disowning the place that is harmed." Elsewhere he describes this as accepting the "uncanniness" of our fallen world and our uncertain future. A source of this uncanniness is the knowledge that there is no longer such a thing as true wilderness—no acre of the world has escaped the presence of man. Our fingerprint has entered the fossil record, inscribed in cesium, plutonium, and plastic.

An aesthetics of the uncanny already exists—you can see it, for instance, in Edward Burtynsky's photographs of industrial landscapes, the eerie underwater reef sculptures of Jason deCaires Taylor, and Margaret Atwood's futuristic MaddAddam novel trilogy. But Purdy's uncanniness can also be detected in new technologies, such as the use of genetic tools to bring back extinct species, create drought- and pest-resistant crops, and grow artificial human organs in a lab. Purdy doesn't try to imagine exactly what the future we're creating will look like. But someone will have to do it. It may take a new Humboldt. Until then, the original Humboldt will do fine. □

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# Why Free Markets Make Fools of Us

Cass R. Sunstein

## Phishing for Phools: The Economics of Manipulation and Deception

by George A. Akerlof and  
Robert J. Shiller.  
Princeton University Press,  
272 pp., \$24.95

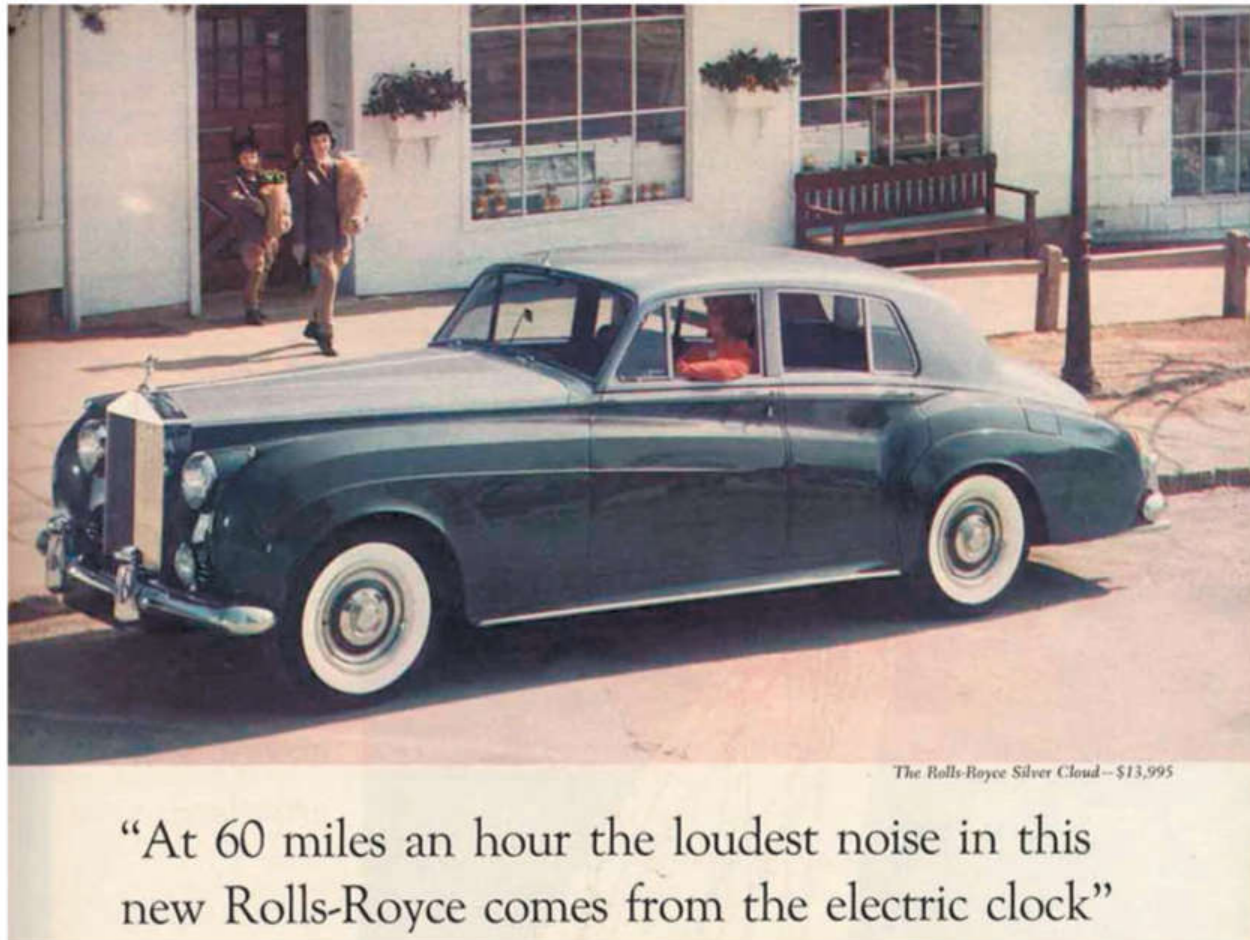
Very few economists foresaw the great recession of 2008–2009. Why not? Economists have long assumed that human beings are “rational,” but behavioral findings about human fallibility have put a lot of pressure on that assumption. People tend to be overconfident; they display unrealistic optimism; they often deal poorly with risks; they neglect the long term (“present bias”); and they dislike losses a lot more than they like equivalent gains (“loss aversion”). And until recent years, most economists have not had much to say about the problem of inequality, which seems to be getting worse.

There is a strong argument that within the economics profession, these problems are closely linked, and that they have had unfortunate effects on public policy. Most economists celebrate free markets, invoking the appealing idea of consumer sovereignty. If people are buying potato chips, candy, and beer, or making risky investments, that’s their business; they know their own values and tastes. Outsiders, and especially those who work for the government, have no right to intervene. To be sure, things are different if someone is inflicting harms on third parties. If a company is emitting air pollution, the government can legitimately respond. But otherwise, many economists tend to believe that people should fend for themselves.

It is true that companies might try to take advantage of consumers and investors, perhaps with outright lies, perhaps with subtler forms of deception, perhaps by manipulating their emotions. But from the standpoint of standard economic thinking, that’s nothing to panic about. The first line of defense is competition itself—and the market’s invisible hand. Companies that lie, deceive, and manipulate people are not going to last long. The second line of defense is the law. If a company is really engaging in fraud or deception, government regulators might well get involved, and customers are likely to have a right to compensation. But for economists, competitive markets are generally trustworthy, and so the old Latin phrase retains its relevance: *caveat emptor*.

By emphasizing human fallibility, the group of scholars known as behavioral economists has raised a lot of doubts about this view. Their cata-

log of errors on the part of consumers and investors can be taken to identify a series of “behavioral market failures,” each of them calling for some kind of government response (such as information campaigns to promote healthy eating or graphic warnings to discourage smoking). But George Akerlof and Robert Shiller want to go far beyond behavioral economics, at least in its current form. They offer a much more general, and quite damning, account of why free markets and competition cause serious problems.



*An advertisement for Rolls-Royce from the late 1950s*

Both Akerlof and Shiller have won the Nobel Prize; they rank among the most important economists of the last half-century. They are also intellectual renegades. Akerlof has been interested in the persistence of caste systems, involuntary unemployment, rat races, the effects of personal identity, and what happens when sellers know things that buyers don’t. He has long been a proponent of integrating psychology and economics. A specialist in the financial system, Shiller has explored the role of “irrational exuberance” in producing wildly inflated stock, bond, and real estate prices, which are bound to come down. He believes that investors make serious mistakes, and also that they run in herds, which can produce bubbles. Like Akerlof, he is keenly interested in seeing what psychology can add to economic theory.

Akerlof and Shiller believe that once we understand human psychology, we will be a lot less enthusiastic about free markets and a lot more worried about the harmful effects of competition. In their view, companies exploit human weaknesses not necessarily because they are malicious or venal, but because the market makes them do it. Those who fail to exploit people will lose out to those who do. In mak-

ing that argument, Akerlof and Shiller object that the existing work of behavioral economists and psychologists offers a mere list of human errors, when what is required is a broader account of how and why markets produce systemic harm.

Akerlof and Shiller use the word “phish” to mean a form of angling, by which phishermen (such as banks, drug companies, real estate agents, and cigarette companies) get phools (such as investors, sick people, homeowners, and smokers) to do something that is in the

face debilitating financial insecurity, largely as a result of their own mistaken decisions, spurred by phishermen. Bad government is itself a product of phishing and phoolishness, for “we are prone to vote for the person who makes us the most comfortable,” even when that person’s decisions are effectively bought by special interests.

In a reversal of Adam Smith, Akerlof and Shiller contend that the invisible hand of the market guarantees phishing. Consider Cinnabon, whose brilliant motto is “Life Needs Frosting,”

and which attracts customers with a seductive smell (and which has not made caloric information on its products at all easy to find). Or consider health clubs, a \$22 billion industry with over 50 million customers, many of whom choose expensive monthly contracts, even though they would save a lot of money if they paid by the visit. In effect, they are paying not to go to the gym.

With reference to such examples, Akerlof and Shiller suggest that people can be imagined to have two kinds of tastes: those that would really make their lives better, and those that determine how they actually choose. In their view, the latter—influenced by a kind of “monkey-on-the-shoulder” who makes bad choices—often prevails. The problem is that as if by an invisible hand, companies “out of their

own self-interest will satisfy those monkey-on-the-shoulder tastes.”

To support this claim, Akerlof and Shiller point to an uncanny prediction by John Maynard Keynes in 1930. Keynes expected that by 2030, the standard of living would be eight times higher. We are on track to get in that vicinity. At the same time, Keynes made a profound mistake. He predicted that the workweek would plummet to fifteen hours and that people would struggle not with financial problems, but with a surfeit of leisure. That isn’t going to happen. What Keynes missed is that free markets generate new desires. In Akerlof and Shiller’s words, markets “do not just produce what we really want; they also produce what we want according to our monkey-on-the-shoulder tastes.”

Phishermen know how to give rise to temptations, thus generating novel “needs.” For any human weakness, the invisible hand will produce phishermen, who will exploit phools—which means that long working hours, and difficulties in making ends meet, will continue to be with us even if the standard of living goes up eight times again (and then again).

Akerlof and Shiller contend that an understanding of phishing and phool-



ishness helps to explain the financial crisis of 2008–2009. In their account, the origins of the crisis lay in “the subversion of the system for rating fixed-income securities” such as bonds. For a long time, the public consulted the ratings of securities by US credit agencies in order to assess their likelihood of default. Until the 1990s, those ratings could be trusted. One reason is that securities were simple to assess. Another is that credit agencies avoided any conflict of interest. But when those agencies took on the task of rating bafflingly complex securities, above all financial derivatives, investors were no longer in a position to know whether the agencies continued to be worthy of trust. Around the same time, serious conflicts of interests emerged, as credit agencies began to charge investment banks for their ratings. As the banks ended up paying the raters’ bills, the ratings could no longer be trusted. But because ratings had been reliable in the past, investors thought they continued to be reliable.

Although investors were being phished, they “had no reason to be suspicious. They had been told of the wonders of free markets.” But free markets were not so wondrous, because they put the producers of the new, complex, risky securities at a big advantage over the producers of the older, simpler, safer ones. After all, the new securities promised higher returns while disguising the risk of default:

As long as a significant part of the bond-buying public was willing to swallow the myth whole, the investment bankers had an incentive to produce those rotten avocados,

and to extract from the agencies the high ratings that would be the cover-up.

When the risk materialized, the whole system fell apart. (In this book, they do not emphasize the problem of subprime mortgages, which Shiller has explored elsewhere, and which also involved plenty of phishing.)

Akerlof and Shiller think that the idea of phishing also helps to explain modern advertising, especially when we focus on the crucial role of narrative in human thinking. Clever marketers offer simple, attractive stories about their products, and get those stories to stick in the human mind. Consider a famous advertisement for Rolls-Royce, displaying an elegant young mother in the driver’s seat, turned slightly toward her elegant children, who are walking toward the car from outside the entrance to an elegant grocery store. The headline of the copy: “At 60 miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes from the electric clock.” Advertisements of this kind tell an appealing story about what life would be like with the product.

Akerlof and Shiller contend that presidents are sold in essentially the same way, as “modern statistical techniques now tell marketers and advertisers—both private and political—when and how to phish, just as modern techniques in geology tell the oil and gas companies where and how to drill.” They single out the 2012 Obama campaign for its use of statistical testing “as a new art form.” In their view, campaigns now know how to target “voters individual-by-individual,” with the help of modern

statistical techniques. We should expect more such targeting in 2016.

Akerlof and Shiller contend that the invisible hand guarantees “rip-offs,” which are “fertile ground to find phishing for phools.” At the closings of home sales, for example, people face a baffling array of transaction costs. Real estate brokers’ fees usually run to 6 percent, and they are often higher. These and other costs are imposed after most buyers have made their decisions and are in no position to bargain. Akerlof and Shiller are also concerned that people spend a lot more money with credit cards than they do with cash. Sellers allow customers to use their cards for free, and do not charge them the fees on sales that they pay to the credit card companies. For many customers, the use of credit cards turns out to be a genuine problem, not least because they end up spending significant amounts on late fees and interest on unpaid balances. As it turns out, credit cards are “a major cause of personal bankruptcy,” leading Akerlof and Shiller to conclude “if credit cards are not phishing for phools, the companies who purvey them should tell it to the judge.”

Why do so many people smoke and drink? As early as the late 1940s, scientists were finding an association between smoking and lung cancer, to which the tobacco companies, acting as phishermen, responded with a specific strategy, which was to sow doubt. They “knew they could find other ‘scientists’ (especially among smokers) who would strongly voice the opinion that there was no ‘proven’ link between smoking

and cancer.” The result of their efforts was to insinuate an influential “new story into the relationship between smoking and health,” one that emphasized a serious “scientific controversy.” (Climate change, anyone?) That story eventually failed, but it took decades, and even now, almost 18 percent of adults are smokers.

Akerlof and Shiller believe that the harms of alcohol are greatly underappreciated. They think that those harms “could be comparable to the harms from cigarettes, affecting not just 3 or 4 percent of the population, as a chronic life-downer [i.e., cause of a shortened life], but, rather, affecting 15 to 30 percent; the higher number especially if we also include the alcoholics’ most affected family members.” Akerlof and Shiller assemble suggestive evidence that alcohol consumption does far more damage to health than we think. Their larger theme is that “alcohol studies remain largely underfunded,” and without the necessary research, “we are especially prone to be phished for phools, since we cannot know whether we have the right story.” In their view, significant federal tax increases on ethanol (the kind of alcohol in alcoholic drinks) could have major health benefits—but the industry has successfully worked to prevent any such increases.

Akerlof and Shiller make related arguments about the marketing of pharmaceuticals (with reference to the Vioxx scandal), the success of Facebook (which, they argue, is a mixed blessing for young people in particular), the sale of junk bonds, and the democratic process. With respect to

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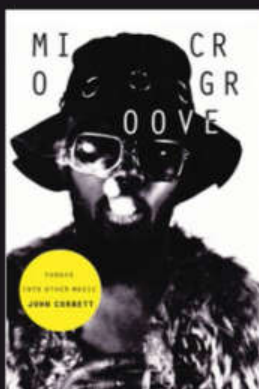
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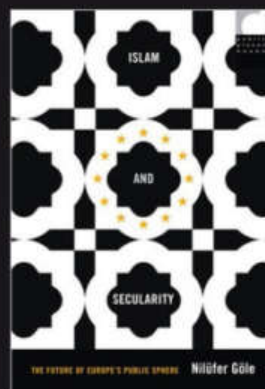
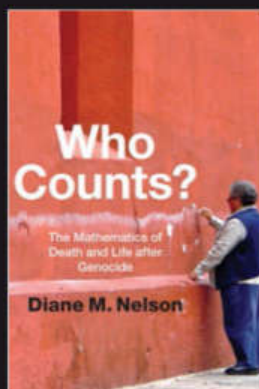
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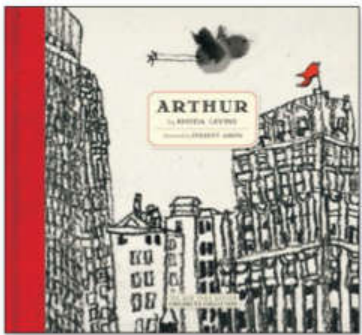
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## Arthur

Rhoda Levine

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After a fine, green summer in Central Park, all the birds are preparing to fly south—except for Arthur. He’s off playing, and is left behind.

Soon it begins to get cold and the trees are losing their leaves. Arthur feels uneasy and lonely, especially after his nest is scattered to the winds.

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the latter, they are concerned about a clever electoral strategy commonly used to hook “phishable voters.” With this strategy, politicians endorse policies that “appeal to the typical voter on issues that are salient to her, and where she will be informed,” while also adopting a “stance that appeals to donors” on issues on which the typical voter is uninformed. Because of the largely unregulated system for corporate donations, lobbyists can enjoy spectacular returns, as when they give money with the hope of extracting votes, or favors, on high-stakes issues (such as regulation of savings and loan companies or highly technical tax questions) that are too complex to attract the attention of most voters.

From all of these examples, Akerlof and Shiller offer a general account, which is that phishing occurs because of the “manipulation of focus.” Like magicians and pickpockets, phishermen are able to take advantage of “an errant focus by the phool.” Indeed, the idea that free markets work, and that government is the problem, “is itself a phish for phools,” a kind of story, one that does not capture reality. With respect to Social Security reform, securities regulation, and campaign finance reform, the United States has suffered from false and skewed claims that fail to account for the fact that free markets make people free not only to choose but also “free to phish, and free to be phished. Ignorance of those truths is a recipe for disaster.”

Akerlof and Shiller contend that behavioral economists have failed to explore, or perhaps even to see, the ubiquity of phishing, and the extent to which free markets promote it. Instead of a catalog of human errors and behavioral biases, they seek a more general account, one that gives “a picture to the mental frames that inform people’s decisions.” That picture involves “the stories we are telling ourselves.” Akerlof and Shiller believe that the idea of storytelling is “a new variable” for economics, one that explains why “people make decisions that can be quite far from maximizing their own welfare.” Thus “phishing for phools is not some occasional nuisance. It is all over the place.” Whenever “we have a weakness—if we have a way in which we are phishable—the phishermen will be there in waiting.”

Akerlof and Shiller make a convincing argument that phishing occurs because of the operation of the invisible hand, not in spite of it. If a company can make money by deceiving or manipulating people, someone is going to create such a company, and it will prosper (unless the law regulates it). And if it prospers, companies that do not deceive or manipulate people may well be at a competitive disadvantage. Of course there are a lot of consumers out there, and some of them will avoid phishermen. In fact markets might well be segmented into sophisticates and phools, with the former avoiding, and the latter flocking to, complex (but risky) financial products, expensive closing fees, tobacco, and alcohol. Indeed it would be most accurate to point to a continuum of consumers and investors, with varying degrees of susceptibility to deception and manipulation. Akerlof and Shiller are certainly right to say that phishing can be profitable.

At the same time, there is a lot of vagueness in that idea. One way to clarify it would be to isolate the behavioral biases that phishermen might exploit. Drawing on empirical findings, we could speak of optimistic phools, overconfident phools, loss-averse phools, inattentive phools, and present-biased phools, and ask how numerous they are, and examine whether and under what conditions companies are able to take advantage of them. But as we have seen, Akerlof and Shiller want to go beyond a catalog of behavioral biases in favor of “a very general way to describe the mental frames that underlie people’s decisions,” one that emphasizes the stories people tell themselves.

Such stories are undoubtedly important, but here is a possible objection. For social scientists, it is essential to

drug is neurological damage, it is fair to speak of deception.

Akerlof and Shiller might have limited their analysis to the economics of fraud and deception, urging that the categories should be broadened to include (for example) complex financial products that carry serious risks that investors are unable to understand. How helpful is it to speak of phishing and phools? One answer is that Akerlof and Shiller want to go well beyond fraud and deception to capture all cases in which sellers successfully market goods to buyers who do not benefit from the transaction. They do not spend a lot of time unpacking the idea of “manipulation,” but they appear to be speaking of people who can be phished because sellers are able to take advantage of their emotions or their



Drawing by Edward Lear

come up with testable hypotheses. For example, economists hypothesize that when the price of a particular good increases, people will buy less of it. Behavioral economists also claim to have tested, and demonstrated, the existence of biases. For example, they say they have found that consumers’ decisions are more affected by a small tax (a loss) than a small subsidy (a gain), and that teachers perform better when employers threaten them with a loss than when they promise them a bonus. No one should doubt that people are influenced by the stories that they tell themselves, as the authors claim. But is that a testable hypothesis? Does it lead to distinctive predictions, which can be shown to be right or wrong?

It is arresting to speak of “phishermen” and “phools,” but Akerlof and Shiller would surely agree that when people make decisions that are questionable, or that go badly wrong, they might not be phools. Consumers might greatly enjoy wine, cheese, candy, and ice cream, and even if these choices turn out to be unhealthy, we need not speak of either phishing or phools. And Akerlof and Shiller would not disagree with the proposition that many people practice self-control when it comes to possible dangers, and when they do, their choices may be highly informed. Such people may be difficult to phool.

Separate treatment is required for cases of fraud and deception, as where sellers are untruthful about what they are selling, or fail to disclose relevant facts. If a company falsely tells people that a new drug will cure cancer, we have a case of fraud, and if it fails to inform people that a side effect of the

cognitive biases, thus leading to transactions that are not in buyers’ interests.

This is a promising idea, and to make progress on it, it is probably best to be quite specific. Emotions do not always lead consumers astray; people might know that they will love using a gorgeous new computer, eating a piece of chocolate cake (or two), and driving a fast new car. (Life does need frosting.) With respect to cognitive biases, the problem of high closing costs (which involves the difficulty of handling complexity) is different from that of tobacco consumption (which involves addiction and unrealistic optimism), and both of these are different from the problem of excessive use of credit cards (which involves bias toward the present and neglect of cumulative costs). Once we make such distinctions, we might end up speaking not of phishing in general, but of specific behavioral failures, and seeking remedies that are well suited to each.

In his great marginalia to Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses*, William Blake wrote, “To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit.” Blake exaggerated, of course, and Akerlof and Shiller are the furthest thing from idiots; their extraordinary book tells us something true, and profoundly important, about the operations of the invisible hand. But the largest views can lose focus. If we seek to understand how the invisible hand goes wrong, and whether some kind of intervention is required, there is a lot to be said for specifying mechanisms and testing concrete hypotheses. If we do that, we might go far beyond a mere list, and we will find phishing of many different kinds. □



# A Puzzling Heroine of German Literature

Michael Hofmann

## The Country Road: Stories

by Regina Ullmann,  
translated from the German  
by Kurt Beals.

New Directions, 147 pp., \$15.95 (paper)

It's tempting to adapt Tolstoy's famous sentence about families and say that good books or good writers tend to be good in the same ways. Certainly, if you encounter something that is radically different you are liable to suspect, and perhaps to go on suspecting for a long time, that it's different because it's not good. I've seldom had a sense of having read something thoroughly odd, really quite unlike anything else I knew. Experiences with strong prose—not necessarily happy experiences for me—would include Céline, Wyndham Lewis, Platonov, Djuna Barnes. (For the record I think probably they're all good—not that they help with Regina Ullmann, or resemble her in any way.) I've spent six months with Ullmann, reading her in translation and in her original German, and to tell the truth, mostly not reading her. It's taken me that long perhaps to find her good.

Regina Ullmann (1884–1961) is pretty much off the map, even in her Swiss, Austrian, and Bavarian territories. I had heard her name, but only as one of Rilke's innumerable female correspondents (she shares a volume with him and their mutual friend, the actress and, later, Ullmann's first biographer, Ellen Delp); I had certainly never read anything by her. The critic Ruth Klüger says she is the sort of writer who is rediscovered every twenty years or so, only to need rediscovering again in another twenty. The group of German authors who praised her probably can't be beaten, though they too are getting on a bit: Hesse, Rilke, Musil, and Thomas Mann. Each of their little phrases hints at a core of strangeness and otherness in her: "mystery," "multiplicity of joys," "genius," and most striking of all, "something holy."

But perhaps blurbs don't work in that way, or indeed at all. Certainly, I've known Hesse's admirable "if [Robert Walser] had a hundred thousand readers, the world would be a better place," it seems, for decades; and all that seems to happen is that Hesse, quite without meaning to, puts on another hundred thousand himself. Anyway, it is greatly to the credit of New Directions that it was determined to give Ullmann her first publication in English, 130 years after her birth, and very nearly a hundred years after the original publication of *Die Landstrasse* (*The Country Road*)—which first came out in 1921—and that in doing so they gave an opening to a new and gifted translator, Kurt Beals.

So much reading, so much background, so many stifled comparisons and negative checks, basically to establish that Ullmann is a one-off, an original, a really deeply peculiar writer, when it should be enough to quote the beginning of a story or two from the eleven that make up *The Country Road*—less stories than prose poems, strangely concentrated dream-like scenes, or even printed sermons (because it is all too clear that the flighty though oracular speaker has never ascended the short flight of winding steps



Regina Ullmann; painting by Lou Albert-Lasard, 1915

to a pulpit, even though one can almost hear the "Brothers and Sisters" with which in her mind she begins):

The value of our existence is by no means always a function of its weight. On the contrary, because our fate alone is frequently too light, there are stones, as it were, that we take on as counterweights. And the way that people use them... Some heap these stones upon what is dearest to them on this earth. And others have claimed that they had to swallow them. Ah yes, I know people who look as if they had swallowed stones.

That is from one called "The Old Man." Or take this, from "Strawberries":

And the same thing returns again and again, as if there were only one life in great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, in grandfather, father, and children.

Oh how bright it would be in us if one day we could work this off, if we could begin...

Readers will note that neither the old man nor the strawberries make any appearance in these distant, stately, and generalized preambles. Hence my

word, sermon, for the moral earnestness, the freedom of address, and the willingness to cajole. What Ullmann has to say to us is somehow exemplary, uncomfortable, difficult, long-buried; it is from out of our midst, but also slightly from above, and also from below. It refuses distance, and in its designs on us doesn't mind changing angle, direction, and even plane; most prose is anxious to find *one*, and then hugs it for dear life; whereas, in successive sentences, even in successive clauses, Ullmann will buff, then tunnel, then soar. We come away from her, as she dazzlingly puts it (and she is absolutely right!), "greatly enriched but slightly diminished." It is always a quarter to twelve, always Sunday, and always sermon-time.

The stories, mostly in premodern, rural Alpine settings, are in the main somber, even harsh. "Susanna" relates the death of a childhood friend. "The Old Man" is about a widower who spends his days at a local café, reading the newspaper and reflecting on the death of his wife, an older woman whom he seems to have sent to an early grave through his sullen mistreatment.

The longest, the title story, is about the narrator's painful wandering through hot, dry countryside, then getting a lift on a wagon to a strange inn, and finally finding a room in a half-abandoned village house, only to be driven out of it by a neighbor's compulsive telling of her own marital disappointment. It is like a variant on the last story, called "The Girl," in which a heavily pregnant woman is taken in by a kindly old peasant. Endurance is all, making something of what we are given, which tends to be "hardship, like a garden on the north slope: the red turned to pink, the blue to light blue, the yellow just a hint of gold."

Wisdom is indeed a recurring aspect of Ullmann's writing, the accidental springing of it on the unsuspecting reader, the ready access to the universal-appreciative, the sometimes absurdly hortatory: "A wake like that is a serious thing. We never forget it as long as we live. And that is good." (Another friend, and another member of Rilke's "set," Lou Andreas-Salomé, admired Ullmann and, laughingly, found her "unbearably moralistic.") But there are other aspects of her, and indeed it seems wrong to link Ullmann with any kind of contrived effect; perhaps the wisdom is indeed accidental. Perhaps it's just a function of surprise, spontaneity, folksiness, absence of organization, the "whatever next" that is Ullmann's stock in trade.

Where things really happen is at the level of the production of sentences.

Ullmann speaks with the full unpredictability of the long-silent, the in-turned, and the extremely shy. She makes an eccentric blurt, sometimes a downright embarrassing one: hence the defensive formality—the generations, the stones, the biblical "And"—of the beginnings I quoted, and the reader's apprehension near the finish of her pieces. Begin anywhere, end anywhere, and for all that, somehow—inadvertently, almost—capture a story.

Ullmann writes as though she didn't know how it was done, as though she had never read much of anything; the only obvious presences in her writing are the Bible, fairy tales, and Rilke. When they eventually met in 1912, Rilke, himself retiring, a virtuoso of absence, and not one to put others at their ease, was so struck by her tongue-tiedness—she says in a memoir that she could manage just two words, and was grateful for those: "yes" and "no"—that he suggested they perhaps read aloud to each other first, "perhaps Claudel?," which they did, and became fast friends.

He wrote out her poems and at least one of her stories by hand, and told her off for occasionally trying to be like him. It was his idea, or instruction, that she go to live in the countryside, where she wrote the stories in *The Country Road*. She gave him the idea for a tower, and was the first person to stay at Muzot after his death in 1926. Ullmann would not have had a career (even such a limited "career" as she had), would not have been published, would not have been heard of without Rilke. And as for Rilke, he is never as attractive as he is in his dealings with Ullmann: an intelligent critic and a kind colleague, qualities I quite frankly didn't know he had. I think he saw and respected, perhaps envied, her genuineness. Anything elemental, anything that arranged its being differently, as if it had no alternative, got his vote, whether it was Cézanne or a doll or an animal or children.

Solitaires both, she was a kind of pendant to him: he with his bogus aristocratic lineage and pretensions (such as a supposed "*von Rülko*," or the Danish blueblood Malte, or "Cornet" Christoph Rilke); she writing as though she came from hundreds of years of nameless rural poverty (to wit, from "The Girl": "she was called Julia, and sometimes other things as well")—uncontemporary and antimodern, 1900 going on 1300, Alpine, archaic, pagan-Catholic (although she was from a Jewish family), folksy, country-poor, naive glass painting or *jolie-laide* woodcut.

Sometimes, to get over the shyness of writing, she would dictate, to her mother or a female friend; silences occurred, of half an hour or more; suggestions were not welcomed. It is easy to imagine, even a hundred years later, even in print, even in English, the jerkiness, the severity, the pain, the unplanned hiatus or crisis. The elemental sensations she writes about—heat, solitude, pregnancy, a child without a father, or a wanderer in the properties of others—are like looking through different pieces of colored glass. The uncertain or broken lives: a hunchback,



two hunchbacks, maids, maids galore, a widower, a laborer's disorderly (by some lights, criminal) passion for a feeble-minded girl, a blind woman (in "The First Bath," a story not in *The Country Road*) giving birth.

The stories like to find a balance. Rarely, rarely pleasure, and then paid for. Nothing is so rich that it can't be a form of poverty; nothing so poor that it doesn't at least end. Yes, there are strawberries in "Strawberries," but the rest of supper is withheld; after the show, at the end of "The Hot Air Balloon," the children, "like lizards, blinking, slipped quickly back under our rocks." Always work, and never love, and always old work too, work of the hands. And the only love that is acknowledged or countenanced is that between mothers and children. "A kiss," it says austere—*and it's the last sentence of the book*—"is something that belongs at the end of life." The best we can hope for is kindness, charity, and the luck of perhaps being taken in somewhere.

Ullmann writes about rooms—repeatedly!—as though they were an amenity that had just been invented. Ownership, keenly and cannily observed throughout, is nothing short of a miracle, and not for her. In her typical village setting, "everyone can tell, even at three paces, if someone is an owner or a tenant"; the poor "have become too accustomed to sitting before the door of their own heart." There is something breathless and on tiptoe about her interiors; no wonder, they all belong to other people:

God, what a room that was. How the sun ripened there, too. The sofa had spread out its flower garden. There was an order there, too, it felt like early spring. And some people are like that all the time.

Sometimes she endows things with an emblematic splendor that seems ridiculous or even parodic: "They were magnificent animals, well versed in beauty and idleness. They received the sort of generous attention that others lavish on their geraniums." (The answer: a pair of domestic cats, belonging to a weaver.) Losing the thread, it would appear, she feeds herself cues, little planted rhetorical questions: "Oh, this woman was a wonder. Did she do anything? Indeed, she did." At other times she does the opposite, and enacts a refusal. She brings herself to a point, and suddenly stops:

He walked down the street with the prettiest shop windows. He looked at all the things in them. I can't be sure what he thought as he looked.

Or she is Pyrrhic—provocative and Pyrrhic: "'He,' or in this case let's say 'she,' it normally amounts to the same thing, need only stop to rest..." She is capable of suddenly, quite disconcertingly, disappearing into some physical object:

A lamb came along. As it came closer, its outline growing clearer and sweeter, I could see that it wanted to be petted. Of course, it turned out that the lamb was not

as soft as I had supposed. Its wool was piled up so thickly in spots that it had begun to form ridges; it only appeared as if it would be pleasant to touch. And its bare spots were cool.

Who would ever need or want to pet a lamb after that—or even think of doing so? The experience has been had for us.

And then there are things that we could not replicate if we tried, things for which one would actually have to be Regina Ullmann: metaphors and similes. A sewing machine: "It seemed to speak in short and long sentences, a whole apron in a single breath." Or a performing greyhound in a circus:

But in the first moment that he was free, he yawned as if unspeakably bored; and he seemed to leap into the jaws of the little lump of sugar that awaited him as a reward for his performance.

"Into the jaws of the little lump of sugar" is not possible, I think, without Rilke—those magical reversals and compressions (those habits "that liked being with us," the Rodin bust of the man with the broken nose, "unforgettable as a suddenly raised fist")—but is absolutely as good. And somehow, I think, too, a kind of *style pauvre*. Not depending on detail of perception or richness of vocabulary, just a shift, made in the mind, from what little is available. Nothing imported or contributed, nothing that costs anything. As here, of children:

Those who lived further down the road only knew our name, they tried it out on each of us, the way people call young animals to them, which then go on their way once they see that this is not their master.

Sometimes—often at his best—Rilke is like that too, but I'm thinking perhaps he took it from her, or else it's jointly held: clean and disenchanted and shut "as a post office on Sunday," it says in the Tenth Duino Elegy. "The coffee, made in true Arab fashion, might as well have been set before a cliff." That's Ullmann. A love offering. A wooden coin.

It will be clear already to most readers that a writer like Ullmann will have been unusually conversant in her life with distress and desolation, and so she was. "Hardship is a razor-sharp science," she writes in one of the stories, "we will treat of it no more." (I like to think of her in some after-life, keeping company with Elizabeth Bishop.) Her adventuring father died when she was four, when the family was still in Switzerland, where she was born. She stammered, and "her eyes," as the German poet Peter Hamm writes in an afterword that might usefully have been adopted for this edition, "went off in different directions, so that it seemed as if each of them was looking at the world by itself. She had a squint." (And incidentally, second sight as well.)

She failed school at seven, and when put in a sort of institution at eight, she was always the last, strikingly slow at everything. The one thing she showed

some facility for was writing—rhyming. "*Unser Vater ist gestorben, / die Freud ist uns verdorben*" went an early couplet: "My father's deceased, / all joy has ceased." In 1902, the family left the town of St. Gallen for Munich, then quite a lively and bohemian place; her elder sister Helene took off, ultimately for California.

In 1905, at the age of nineteen, Ullmann became pregnant (the father was a future professor of economics), and gave birth to her illegitimate daughter Gerda on a farm in Austria, staying there for a year. A little later, she had a second daughter, Camilla, with a sinister, fascinating, and finally repulsive character by the name of Otto Gross, who will be known in psychoanalytic and criminological circles. Both daughters were put with foster parents. Regina—Rega as she was mostly known—lived with her mother. The year 1917 was when she took Rilke's advice, and moved from Munich out to the countryside, as he exquisitely put it, to be among cows,

cows and people who don't, when you touch them, collapse into a pile of words (as we in the city do), but resemble a cake-tin for a single word, that's always the same, that's baked into them on Sunday.

She published individual stories and small collections, but never a novel, and *The Country Road* remained her major publication. What you read is what you get. Rilke's friend Lou Albert-Lasard painted three striking portraits of Ullmann, and wrote of her:

Regina Ullmann seemed to come from another time, another world. She sat there stiffly, with her hands folded like a peasant woman's. With the intense, visionary stare of her asymmetrical eyes, she was like an old folksy wood sculpture. It seemed like prophesy, like imprecation when she stammeringly spoke of things that were greatly removed from those that ordinary mortals spoke of.

Another contemporary describes her:

She struggled with words like a twelve-year-old girl. But when telling a story—for which she had a true gift—she would sometimes flow, like a scald. Then she would dry again, and resemble a shame-faced peasant woman.

Rilke wrote to her: "Your soul was born blind, and trained by a seer." And: "Your figures are often so slight one would take them for mute and simple-minded. You cut them a mouth, and they talk deathless things." (For instance her "Rural Monologue of a Man in His Cups," not included in *The Country Road*.)

She was hard up most of her life, trying by typically unregenerate and also luminous ways to get by: gardening, beekeeping, the making of wax figurines. When the war broke out, she—Jewish on both sides of her family (it makes one think again of her peripatetic life and heroines)—was lucky to find herself in Italy, from where she was able to return to Switzerland. She died in 1961, "the weary journey done," as the poet says, and is buried near Munich. □



## Richard Pousette-Dart 1930s

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Richard Pousette-Dart, *The Walking Man*, 1930's, Gouache, ink, and graphite on paper, 15 7/8 x 11 7/8 in. (40.3 x 30.2 cm). Estate of the Artist.



# Why the Water Is Running Out

Norman Gall

## **The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination**

by Matthew Gandy.  
MIT Press, 351 pp., \$30.00

## **Water 4.0: The Past, Present, and Future of the World's Most Vital Resource**

by David Sedlak.  
Yale University Press,  
332 pp., \$18.00 (paper)

Greater São Paulo, a city of 21 million people, is experiencing its worst drought since the 1870s; the city's water supply is in danger. Sewage, pesticide, and trash pollute São Paulo's rivers and reservoirs. Rain falling on the vast paved surface of the metropolis drains quickly into its polluted rivers. Brazil's ample natural resources include 13 percent of the global supply of freshwater for only 3 percent of the world's population. Yet as of August 25 South America's largest city had only enough water in its reservoirs to supply its residents for ninety-three days.

Many of the world's other thirty-six megacities, each with more than 10 million inhabitants, also struggle with limited local water supplies. As recently as 1950, New York was the only city of this size. Half of today's giant cities face mounting difficulties in securing and managing water resources for their growing populations. As in ancient times, water supply is emerging as a challenge to civilizations both rich and poor.

*The Fabric of Space*, by Matthew Gandy, contains six loosely connected essays with much on historic and current water problems in Paris, Berlin, Lagos, Mumbai, Los Angeles, and London. A geographer at University College London, Gandy blames the lack of water on "a mix of technical disagreements, political expediency, administrative inertia, and economic uncertainty [that] produces a common pattern of extended delay" in taking action. He warns that the accelerated rate of climate change "could overwhelm the capacity of many cities to respond" to environmental crises. This is what may well be happening in giant urban agglomerations such as Los Angeles, São Paulo, Mexico City, Mumbai, and Beijing, all of which consume water wastefully while neglecting the need for long-term supplies.

Most conspicuously in danger are the growing number of supergiant cities, with populations of at least 20 million. They are heavily concentrated in poor countries that lack the wealth and institutional strength to manage droughts, floods, and other water emergencies on this scale. Among these supergiants are Delhi (25 million), Shanghai (23 million), Mexico City, São Paulo, and Mumbai (21 million each), and Beijing (20 million). United Nations demographers expect that by 2030 Delhi's population will rise to 36 million and that Tokyo will remain the world's most populous city with 37 million. According to A.K. Biswas of the Third World Center for Water Management in Singapore:

From Istanbul to Johannesburg, and Jakarta to Mexico City, there

are simply no new sources of water that could be harnessed economically and in a socially and environmentally acceptable manner which can quench the continually increasing urban-industrial thirst.

The growth of megacities is just one part of global urbanization. According to the United Nations, while the number of megacities has nearly tripled since 1990, the number of cities with at least one million people has nearly doubled. In Brazil, where I have lived and worked for the past four decades, there now are twenty cities with more than a million



*Children carrying bottled drinking water during China's worst drought in a century, Qinglong, Yunnan province, April 2010*

people each; in 1950, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo were the only two. In São Paulo, living standards started rising in the 1990s with the end of decades of high inflation. Welfare benefits and salaries rose and nutrition improved. Muddy alleys became paved streets. São Paulo is now a sprawling metropolis in the style of Atlanta or Los Angeles, sprouting fancy office towers, hotels, and apartment blocks in new neighborhoods as if to celebrate its leading role in finance and corporate management.

At the same time, São Paulo has come to have many of the water problems of other large cities around the world. Consumers pay for only a small fraction of the operating costs of the water distribution system and many consume water wastefully. There are constant leaks from water and sewage pipes that have deteriorated for lack of maintenance during decades of use. Large volumes of untreated sewage pollute rivers, streams, groundwater, and drinking water. Land surfaces and groundwater levels sink because of excessive pumping. Large-scale theft of piped water deprives these systems of financial resources needed to run and repair them, and to develop future supplies. And governments and utilities are unable to finance and construct projects to bring new water supplies from ever-greater distances.

In his book *Water 4.0*, David Sedlak, a professor of sanitary engineering and codirector of the Berkeley Water

Center at the University of California, traces the development of large-scale water and sewage systems from Roman times to the nineteenth century, when sanitation improved in response to cholera and typhoid epidemics in Europe and North America. He goes on to describe the chemical and biological treatment of water and sewage in the twentieth century. Ever since the Romans, "the big idea behind urban water systems" has, Sedlak observes, been "centralization," getting water to flow from reservoirs to treatment plants and piping systems to final consumers. "In fact, this original design principle has

been so potent that each of the subsequent upgrades was built on this foundation." He adds:

Starting with the addition of filtration and chlorine disinfection on the front end of water distribution systems..., and continuing to the installation of biological wastewater treatment on the sewer end..., modern water infrastructure is still guided by its original blueprint of ancient Roman-style aqueducts and cloacae.

What Sedlak envisions for the future is decentralized use of new technologies for communities or even neighborhoods. The technical fixes that Sedlak proposes—from desalination of seawater, to purification and reuse of sewage, to adopting flush toilets, showers, and washing machines that use less water—may be useful individually, but they won't achieve the scale that megacities need to deal with shortages.

Focusing mainly on the United States, he discusses the current four-year drought in California, which recently led the state government to order a 25 percent cut in water use. Sedlak stresses the need for changes in "public attitudes about the value of water" and for overcoming conflicting interests in a long-standing situation in which "fights over water rights among farmers, cities, and environmentalists periodically created manmade droughts." Such changes in attitudes and policy, he writes,

tend to be unpopular with politically powerful constituencies such as real estate developers, libertarians, and members of anti-tax groups, who bristle at the idea of regulations that restrict personal liberties and increase the costs of home ownership.

In Mumbai, Gandy writes, the provision of water is subject to frequent interruption, leaving millions of poor families dependent on private tank trucks whose owners make deals with corrupt local officials and charge high prices. Gandy writes, moreover, that the municipal water system

suffers from periodic contamination...from corrosion and dilapidation of the water distribution system itself that fosters the spread of bacteria within pipes and enables dirty water to enter the network through cracks and fissures.

São Paulo was founded five centuries ago as a Jesuit mission at the headwaters of rivers and creeks flowing into the heartland of South America. In 1554, the Jesuits built a chapel between two streams on a small hill, which became a provincial capital. São Paulo then stagnated for three centuries until an export boom of coffee grown on the rich soils of the interior. The city grew from a population of only 31,000 in 1870 to 21 million today, one of the fastest long-term rates of urban expansion in world history. Now engineers struggle to sustain a water supply that is often too scarce for the needs of the population while during the rainy season—from October to March—water becomes too abundant for a city vulnerable to floods. The cupidity and negligence of politicians aggravate the effects of droughts and floods. São Paulo's governor, Geraldo Alckmin, a former small-town mayor, denies the importance of water shortages while failing to educate voters about the need to invest in water supplies in order to guarantee living standards and survival. Alckmin plans to run for president of Brazil in 2018.

The metropolis has proved insatiable. Water consumption has grown about one third faster than population since 1990, owing both to better living standards and to the widespread waste of water. One of the most appalling examples of this waste is the pollution caused by the untreated sewage of two million squatters who occupy the shores of São Paulo's two oldest reservoirs in violation of environmental protection legislation. The main source of water used by the city comes from a cluster of reservoirs called the Cantareira, which is sixty miles away. Completed in the 1980s, it sends water through a series of canals, tunnels, and pumping stations to a huge treatment plant on a mountain overlooking the city.

Brazil depends heavily on hydropower to produce electricity, which is in turn used to pump water from its dams and reservoirs into the cities. So São Paulo faces both power and water shortages in the dry months as drought spreads to other heavily populated



regions. The same relation between water and electricity is also a global problem. Even before the current drought, one fifth of the electricity used in California, for example, went to moving and treating water. Worldwide, water supply networks and treatment plants consume 10 percent to 15 percent of all electricity produced. According to a group of specialists at the Brazilian Academy of Sciences:

The water crisis, influenced by changes in climate and hydrology, is aggravated by changes in soil use, by intense urbanization, by deforestation around sources of water and, mainly, by the lack of basic sanitation and treatment of sewage.

These difficulties became clear when I talked to people in former squatter settlements in some of the newer parts of São Paulo, where living standards have risen dramatically over the past two decades. Fear is spreading in these communities. Because of rationing that was not announced by the city authorities, water supplies are cut for several hours each day. In the suburban municipality of Osasco (population 700,000), poor people rise at 3:30 AM to collect water in buckets from faucets that flow for only three hours daily. Pollution and interruption of water supplies have led to epidemics of diarrhea and other intestinal diseases. Some schools close for lack of water in their toilets and kitchens. Luncheonettes, beauty parlors, and factories curtail their working hours. Hospital administrators are anxious about water supplies, especially for the 12,000 diabetics in São Paulo needing hemodialysis three times weekly with specially treated water.

Some people talk of going home to remote communities in Amazonia and the Northeast until the crisis passes. São Paulo authorities ignored years of warnings by federal and state officials of impending water shortages; officials at the state water utility were forbidden to discuss the possibility of rationing as engineers struggled to redistribute the remaining water among local reservoirs to make supplies last through the dry season. It took until August 18 for the São Paulo state government to publicly acknowledge the severity of the crisis.

Many emergency projects are currently running behind schedule because of red tape in the bidding for construction contracts and delays in approvals by many government agencies. Paulo Massato, who manages the water and sewage system for Greater São Paulo, warned of “drastic rotation” (*rodizio*) of water supplies among neighborhoods that could remain without water five days each week. “We’ll give vacations,” he said ironically. “Get out of São Paulo because there’s no water. Those who can will buy mineral water. Those who can’t, go take a bath in your mother’s house.”

In the current drought, Greater São Paulo is receiving one third less water than it usually consumes. The government-owned water and sewage utility, Sabesp, is reducing consumption by lowering pressure in water mains and appealing to the public for conservation; it has ordered its workers in the streets to mechanically cut off supplies to some outlying communities for hours at a time.

But the threat of more severe shortages persists. Sabesp announced that, in an emergency, it could continue to send water to the 1,152 hospitals scattered throughout the metropolis, as well as to 116 hemodialysis clinics and to three hundred prisons and juvenile detention centers. But it could not supply 4,562 schools and other public buildings. To dramatize the scale of the challenge, Sabesp dismissed suggestions that deliveries by tank trucks could overcome shortages in piped water. To supply the 2,200-bed Hospital das Clínicas, Latin America’s biggest, with the nearly 800,000 gallons it consumes daily, Sabesp said that three hundred tank trucks each carrying over 2,500 gallons of water would have to rush to unload every five minutes on a twenty-four-hour schedule. Desper-



*The Itaipú Dam, one of the world’s largest hydroelectric projects, on the Paraná River at the border of Brazil and Paraguay, 1983*

ate local residents also could interrupt these journeys, hijacking and draining water from the tank trucks.

While São Paulo relies on surface water supplies from a large network of reservoirs, Mexico City depends on diminishing groundwater resources as it tries to deal with a perpetual threat that the supply will collapse. Mexico City expanded outward from the dried basin of an ancient highland lake, on a plateau settled by pre-Columbian peoples. Since 1980, Mexico City’s population has grown from 14 million to 21 million. The city’s water supply depends on aquifers, or underground layers of water-bearing rock into which wells are drilled. Overexploitation of these aquifers, at more than twice the rate of natural replenishment, led to the sinking of land in several parts of the city and the lowering by about one meter annually of the groundwater table (the boundary between higher ground without water and lower ground with water). Losses from leaks in mains and pipes drain the distribution network of one fourth of its water intake.

The quality of Mexico City’s water is so bad that it is now one of the world’s biggest markets for bottled water. Poor families not connected to the distribution system must get their water from tank trucks at a cost fourteen times greater than the official price for piped water. The overall cost to the population in adapting to failures of the system including improvising with tank trucks, backyard pumps, and bottled water is more than the cost of operat-

ing the official system. In its desperate effort to supply the metropolis, the government pumps water 1,100 meters uphill from the basin of the Cutzmalá River 110 miles away, consuming as much electricity as is needed to supply power to the nearby city of Puebla, with four million people.

Most great cities—among them New York, London, Paris, Cairo, Vienna, Shanghai, and Mumbai—arose along coasts or the principal rivers of their region. Supergiant cities such as São Paulo, Mexico City, and Beijing are exceptions, and must bring water over great distances in complex and costly engineering projects.

Beijing is at the core of an array of megacities on the North China Plain,

where some 260 million people live. In China today there are six megacities of at least ten million people each, with another two expected to join this group over the next decade. Some three hundred of China’s 657 biggest cities may well face severe water shortages during the next few years.

Beijing emerged three thousand years ago as a walled city on a dusty plain, where Chinese rulers delivered tributes of silk and silver to placate Mongol invaders, long before Kublai Khan conquered China in the thirteenth century and made Beijing the seat of his own Mongol dynasty. Early in the twentieth century, Beijing maintained low population density with about a million people. By the time the Communists came to power in 1949, its population had grown to four million; since then, it has multiplied fivefold in sudden bursts.

Over the past half-century, the government has built eighty-five dams and reservoirs for Beijing and drilled 40,000 wells in its expanding suburbs. These wells supply two thirds of all Beijing’s water, and excessive pumping both of groundwater and underground water has caused the land to sink and gas pipes to fracture. The China Geology Survey reported: “Land subsidence due to excessive groundwater exploitation is a type of regional geological hazard that develops slowly and progresses to a disaster...that is difficult to control.” After thirteen years of drought, Beijing’s per capita water supply fell to 65,000 gallons annually, far below the threshold of 264,000 gallons that UNESCO uses to determine

whether or not a country’s supply is adequate.

China’s rulers seek to meet this challenge with the South–North Water Transfer Project, the most costly and complex hydraulic engineering effort in mankind’s history, which is beginning to send some 12.7 trillion gallons of water yearly from the Yangtze River basin in the southeast to Beijing and other cities in the North China Plain. This volume of water, contained in roughly six hundred miles of canals, mountain tunnels, and pumping stations, is some thirty times greater than the volume carried in normal years by the Colorado River Aqueduct into California and 174 times greater than the water transferred into the Los Angeles aqueduct system each year.

Despite these challenges, Beijing’s planners are taking another leap. They are planning the construction of a giant airport, an “aerotropolis,” as the hub of yet another satellite city at Beijing’s southern outskirts. China has been able to mobilize its financial strength—some \$4 trillion in central bank reserves—as well as expertise in hydraulic engineering dating back millennia to carry out audacious undertakings such as the South–North Water Transfer Project and the Three Gorges Dam, the world’s largest. But these ventures can provide only short-term relief from growing pressure on water resources that are being depleted.

Sedlak argues that such huge water supply problems pose a serious threat to the continued existence of megacities. “There are few places where there is enough water in the local rivers and aquifers to support the current water demands of a city,” he writes in *Water 4.0*. “Perhaps the best long-term solution to our water problems will be to abandon centralized water systems altogether.” This is a bold proposition, but not a realistic option. Water has been so important to the growth of cities that decentralization of water systems may mean, in effect, the dismembering of urban agglomerations; but how this might be done is a question that is not addressed. Proposals to decentralize the water systems ignore the scale of the demands of megacities and the concentration of financial resources, skills, and political power needed to manage these complexities.

Many megacities have been living dangerously, allowing the risks of their water supply to accumulate even while they threaten to overwhelm the capacity of local institutions. Politicians are notoriously reluctant to discuss these dangers. However, the challenge of survival may create new priorities as water supplies become more precarious. We can hope that the need to safeguard the volume and quality of water for large urban populations may lead to both improved efficiency of public institutions to conserve supplies and also modernized distribution systems, reducing the scandalous levels of waste in many of them. Such civic mobilization may also require raising the price of water and regulating consumption in order to pay for costly investments. So far, in too many megacities, the water crises are growing just slowly enough to allow their citizens and leaders to avoid confronting the large-scale changes that are needed. What is lacking in policies toward water supplies is a clear sense of purpose. □

Randa Bishop/Contact Press Images



# Auden: Cranky, Cautious, Brilliant

Fintan O'Toole

**The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose, Volume V, 1963–1968**  
edited by Edward Mendelson.  
Princeton University Press,  
561 pp., \$65.00

**The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose, Volume VI, 1969–1973**  
edited by Edward Mendelson.  
Princeton University Press,  
790 pp., \$65.00

When Wystan Auden wrote his long poetic “Letter to Lord Byron” in 1936, the author was on his way to being almost as famous as the addressee had once been. At twenty-nine, Auden had already established himself, not just as a literary but as a political presence. Soon, his name would be so resonant that James Joyce could use it (humorously) in *Finnegans Wake* as a pun on the father of the gods, Odin. He was becoming a 1930s English highbrow version of Bob Dylan in the early 1960s—the apparent voice of a leftist generation. Yet in the “Letter to Lord Byron,” Auden confesses that “left-wing friends” are warning him:

*Your fate will be to linger on  
outcast  
A selfish pink old Liberal to  
the last.*

Auden does not say whether he agrees with those friends. But the prediction, as he grew older, may have come to seem a little too close to the bone. In 1967, when he prepared a second edition of *Letters from Iceland*, in which “Letter to Lord Byron” had appeared, he cut these lines (as well as many others). They do not appear in the *Collected Longer Poems*, published the following year, or in Edward Mendelson’s authoritative edition of the *Collected Poems*.

By 1963, when the final two volumes of Mendelson’s superb edition of Auden’s prose (the fifth and sixth volumes of the monumental *Complete Works*) begin, the poet has become pretty much the pale pink old Liberal his left-wing associates prophesied thirty years earlier. By 1970, when he published his delightfully idiosyncratic “commonplace book,” *A Certain World*, Auden could construe himself in episcopal terms:

In my own case, I like to fancy that, had I taken Anglican Holy Orders, I might by now be a bishop, politically liberal I hope, theologically and liturgically conservative I know.

Even those Marxist friends of the 1930s who were aware that both of Auden’s grandfathers were Church of England clergymen and suspected that he was a

closet counterrevolutionary might not have gone quite so far in predicting his future. But the Auden we find in the articles, essays, lectures, and reviews from the last decade of his life is indeed rather like an aging and learned English bishop, personally benign and tolerant, but ruefully convinced at heart that the world is going to hell in a handcart if it does not repent soon.

There is, in the late Auden, little of T. S. Eliot’s ranting of his conservative

poems from this period have a quiet assurance, so emotionally understated that they can seem almost detached in their wry self-observation. He seems comfortable with the imperfections of his middle-aged life: “Ordinary human unhappiness/is life in its natural color...” (“The Cave of Nakedness,” written in June 1963). His output of literary journalism was prodigious but he did not upset himself by reviewing books he did not like. His essays and reviews for *The New York Review*, *The New Yorker*, and other publications were delivered at the right time and to the right length, in a style that is punctilious without severity, conversational without condescension. The signs are of equanimity, not rage.

Yet an almost apocalyptic crankiness occasionally bursts through. One startling example is the end of an elegant and erudite piece Auden wrote for *Life* magazine in 1966 on the fall of Rome. After the kind of lucid exposition that might be expected from a great poet with a classical education, he suddenly lurches into Book of Revelations mode:

I think a great many of us are haunted by the feeling that our society, and by ours I don’t just mean the United States or Europe, but our whole worldwide technological civilisation, whether officially labelled capitalist, socialist or communist, is going to go smash and probably deserves to.

(One has some sympathy for the editors at *Life* who asked Auden to drop this stuff and declined to publish the piece when he refused.) Elsewhere, Auden’s despair about the terminal decline of civilization is sparked by everything from “heroin addicts and beats” to the contemporary poetry that “increasingly revolts me,” from “the revolting nervous vulgarity of our affluent mass society” to the fluidity of word usage. (He agrees with Evelyn Waugh that “words have basic inalienable meanings, departure from which is either conscious metaphor or inexcusable vulgarity.”)

This hell-in-a-handcart side of Auden reaches a climax at the end of an otherwise fascinating essay in *The New Yorker* in 1965 on Waugh and Leonard Woolf when he veers sharply off the road and ends up recommending the extinction of 90 percent of the earth’s population:

How can we contemplate the not so distant future with anything but alarm when no method both morally tolerable and practically effective has yet been discovered for reducing the population of the world to a tenth of its present size and keeping it there?

Inside the urbane 1960s Auden, it seems, there is a mad declinist, an offspring of Thomas Malthus and Oswald Spengler, trying to get out. Auden’s desire to be “kept in due control by good manners” can thus be read as his way of keeping this creature in its cage. For the most part, he does so with remarkable success.

Auden also had particular biographical and aesthetic reasons for reticence and caution. In his eloquent memorial address for his old friend and fellow poet Louis MacNeice, delivered in All Souls Church in London in October 1963, Auden implicitly contrasts his own back catalog to MacNeice’s:

Every poet knows that, when he looks back over what he has written, the poems it is a torment and a shame to recall are not those which, for one reason or another, were failures—no poet who writes much can hope to escape writing some poems which are bad or, at least, boring—but those which he knows to be clever forgeries, expressing feelings or attitudes which were not really his, but which vanity, a wish to please an audience, or the wrong kind of conscience deluded him into fancying were genuine. Of these, he is very rightly ashamed, because he cannot say “I should have written it differently” or “It was the best I could do at the time”: he can only say “I ought never to have written it, and I needn’t have.”

There can be no doubt that the torment and shame he speaks of here are his own. This passage in the oration brings to mind his foreword to B. C. Bloomfield’s *W. H. Auden: A Bibliography*, written around the same time. Here he accuses himself directly of just this kind of feigned or forced effect, in relation to his poem on the eve of World War II, “September 1, 1939.” Soon after it was published, he writes in 1964, he reread it and came to the famous (or infamous) line “We must love one another or die.”

[I] said to myself: “That’s a damned lie! We must die anyway.” So in the next edition I altered it to “We must love one another and die.” This didn’t seem to do either so I cut the stanza. Still no good. The whole poem, I realised, was infected with an incurable dishonesty and must be scrapped.

It might be argued that there is something exaggerated in this self-reproach—“We must love one another or die” is not really, in the context of the poem and of the war, such an awful line. But for Auden himself, this revulsion is inescapable. Once he abandoned embattled England for the safety of New York (if asked his nationality during the period when Britain was standing virtually alone against Hitler, he would reply, “I am a New Yorker”), Auden had no choice but to abandon also any notion of himself as a public and oracular poet on the Yeatsian model. He would later claim that “the



Cecil Beaton Studio Archive/Sotheby's

W. H. Auden, 1953; photograph by Cecil Beaton

Christian prejudices or of W. B. Yeats’s authoritarian shaking of the fist at the “filthy modern tide.” In his introduction to an anthology of the writings of Protestant mystics, Auden quotes approvingly from an unnamed Anglican bishop, “Orthodoxy is reticence,” and from C. D. Broad, “A healthy appetite for righteousness, kept in due control by good manners, is an excellent thing.” Auden’s good manners make him a much nicer companion but a much less forceful prose writer than Eliot or Yeats. In him we find both the pleasures and the limits of temperance and moderation.

The most fascinating revelation of these volumes, however, is that underneath the surface of Auden’s urbane writings, there is surprisingly much that is in need of moderation. By 1963, when they begin, Auden was fifty-six and an apparently settled and affable figure. He had exorcised the ghosts of his controversial departure from England on the brink of World War II by serving as professor of poetry at Oxford, a role in which he had enjoyed considerable success, from 1956 to 1961. He was elected an honorary student (in effect a fellow) of Christ Church, and spent some time in Oxford each year, as he moved between his homes in New York and Austria, where he was, as he wrote in “Thanksgiving for a Habitat,” “at last... dominant/over three acres.”

Spiritually and intellectually, he was securely anchored in the high church Anglican faith of his childhood. His



reason (artistic) I left England and went to the US was precisely to *stop* me writing poems like ‘Sept 1st 1939,’” but the reverse is surely equally true: the reason he stopped writing public poems in the manner he learned from Yeats is because he had left England.

Once he had done so, the left-wing positions he had taken in the 1930s had to be reconfigured as insincere poses, expressions, as he claims in 1965, in the foreword to his *Collected Shorter Poems*, of “feelings or beliefs which [the] author never felt or entertained.” He became a hyperactive editor and reviser of his own earlier canon, arranging poems alphabetically rather than chronologically so as to conceal the links between a poem and its immediate context, erasing some political poems like “Spain” or “September 1, 1939” altogether, and heavily redacting others. All his high rhetorical gestures had to be reduced in line with his new creed, enunciated in his 1967 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures:

Art is impotent. The utmost an artist can hope to do for his contemporary readers is, as Dr Johnson said, to enable them a little better to enjoy life or a little better to endure it.

Hence the restraint that marks so much of Auden’s prose in the 1960s and 1970s. As an American citizen and a high-profile contributor to *The New York Review* and *The New Yorker*, for example, Auden could hardly avoid the Vietnam War altogether. But he came quite close. Rather ironically, the leftist Auden of the 1930s was now back in political vogue: a television commercial for Lyndon Johnson’s election campaign in 1964 actually alluded to “September 1, 1939.” But Auden was no longer that writer. He told a newspaper reporter in 1965 that he was “the only New York intellectual who supports” the war. A few months later, in his contribution to a gathering of statements, *Writers Take Sides on the Vietnam War*, he accused those in favor of American withdrawal of being pro-Communist and continued:

I believe a negotiated peace, to which the Vietcong will have to be a party, to be possible, but not yet, and that, therefore, American troops, alas, must stay in Vietnam until it is. But it would be absurd to call this answer mine. It simply means that I am an American citizen who reads *The New York Times*.

These hopes for a negotiated peace were not, of course, realized and by 1968 Auden’s position had changed. He now identified himself publicly with those who demanded the withdrawal of US forces:

Today, though we are still, alas, a minority, the number of persons in this country of every shade of political coloration who have come to the conclusion, however reluctantly, that the rest of the world is right in thinking that it is our moral duty to withdraw from Vietnam is increasing daily.

Almost as striking as the taking of this relatively advanced position, though, is the diffidence with which Auden expresses it. Even under the pressure of such bitterly contested events, he would

not return to the intellectual barricades of the 1930s.

This caution is everywhere in Auden’s prose writing. Considering that he was consciously homosexual from the age of fifteen and notably frank in talking about sex to his friends from an early age, the public Auden is remarkably coy about homosexuality and the situation of gay men in an era of legal repression. In a (subsequently redacted) passage of “Letter to Lord Byron,” the Auden of 1936 had referred to the news that his lover Christopher Isherwood was about to publish a book:

*I must be quick if I’m to get my oar in  
Before his revelations bring the law in.*

Now, reviewing Oscar Wilde’s letters for *The New Yorker* in 1963, he is breezily dismissive of the laws under which Wilde was prosecuted:

Whether a law which makes homosexual acts between consenting adults a crime be just or unjust is debatable.... To ninety-nine per cent of practicing homosexuals, it makes no difference, so far as their personal liberty is concerned, whether such a law be on the statute book or not.

This seems deliberately obtuse, but it is not out of keeping with the rather haughty tone Auden generally adopts in relation to the lives of other homosexual men, as if they had nothing whatever to do with him. When he ventures into autobiography, in the course of the long *New Yorker* review of memoirs by Leonard Woolf and Evelyn Waugh that is one of the most intriguing pieces collected by Mendelson, he hints that he is at least not repelled by the idea of homosexual experience. He mentions an older man (identified by Auden biographers as a journalist called Michael Davidson) who took a great interest in him when he was sixteen:

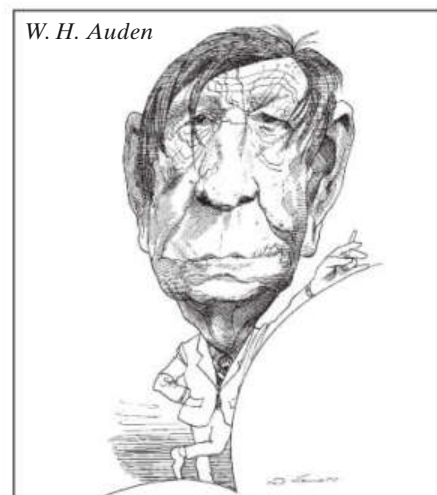
He was a practicing homosexual and had, I think, been to prison. Why he should have taken a shine to me I cannot imagine, since I was a very plain boy. He made advances, which I rejected, not on moral grounds but because I thought him unattractive.

Elsewhere, however, a reader ignorant of Auden’s biography might assume that homosexuality never entered his head. In the introduction to the Protestant mystical writings that is perhaps his most important exploration of spirituality, there is a section on erotic love. It takes for granted that eros operates only between opposite genders: “To the degree that I love both Elizabeth and Mary, I cannot say which I love more.... Each of us is born either male or female and endowed with an impersonal need to mate with a member of the opposite sex.” Again, in one of his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures in 1967: “It is no longer sufficient that the girl we love shall know that we love her, the whole world must know.”

There is an irony here: in his determination to avoid striking dishonest political poses, Auden ends up adopting dishonest personal ones. And this is

not because he had no other option. Intriguingly, Mendelson mentions in an appendix on Auden’s unwritten works that he twice set about writing a statement on the antihomosexuality laws. In 1954, he began an anonymous essay for *Encounter* “but it turned out so *anti* homintern that I tore it up.” (“Homintern” was used in this period to suggest the existence of a “gay mafia” in high places.) In 1965, he began a draft statement on the same subject but never finished it. He opted instead to leave for a long time the impression that he was primarily interested in mating with Elizabeths or Marys.

It is only in 1969, in a sparkling and startling essay on J. R. Ackerley’s memoir *My Father and Myself* in *The New York Review*, that Auden comes close to acknowledging his own sexuality. Ackerley’s book is frank about his own gay sex life, and Auden responds to it with a



frankness of his own. His essay is surely one of the very few articles, even in these groundbreaking pages, to include two phrases that had never been in print before. It was an ambition of Auden’s to be cited in this way in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and he managed it twice with this piece. It includes the terms “Plain-Sewing,” which means mutual masturbation, and “Princeton-First-Year,” which means frottage. Whether Princeton itself can claim copyright on this coinage is unclear, but in any case Auden’s essay is cited in the 1982 supplement to the OED. Auden’s worldly views on the subject can be hair-raising (“among thirteen- and fourteen-year-old boys there are a great many more Lolitas than the public suspects”), but at least the reader can have been in little doubt that Auden is writing about these things through his own experiences. There are no decorous Marys or Elizabeths.

Auden’s usual reticence about sexuality is part of a broader anxiety about any kind of personal revelation. He can never make up his mind about it. In the Ackerley review, for example, he criticizes the author because he “is never quite explicit about what he *really* preferred to do in bed”—the implication being that we are entitled to all the most intimate details. But in a discussion after a seminar at Columbia University a few months later, we find Auden attacking nakedness on stage:

This thing of taking your clothes off on the stage and doing all those things... [makes] me wonder if they can have any real friends, because surely there is an essential difference between the public and the private life. You take off your clothes in private; sex is a private matter.

This contradiction is entirely typical. In reviewing artistic biographies and letters, Auden almost always insists that they are, in principle, immoral intrusions into privacy and tell us nothing about art. He puts it most bluntly in the foreword to *A Certain World*:

Biographies of writers, whether written by others or themselves, are always superfluous and usually in bad taste. A writer is a maker, not a man of action. To be sure, some, in a sense all, of his works are transmutations of his personal experiences, but no knowledge of the raw ingredients will explain the peculiar flavor of the verbal dishes he invites the public to taste: his private life is, or should be, of no concern to anybody except himself, his family and his friends.

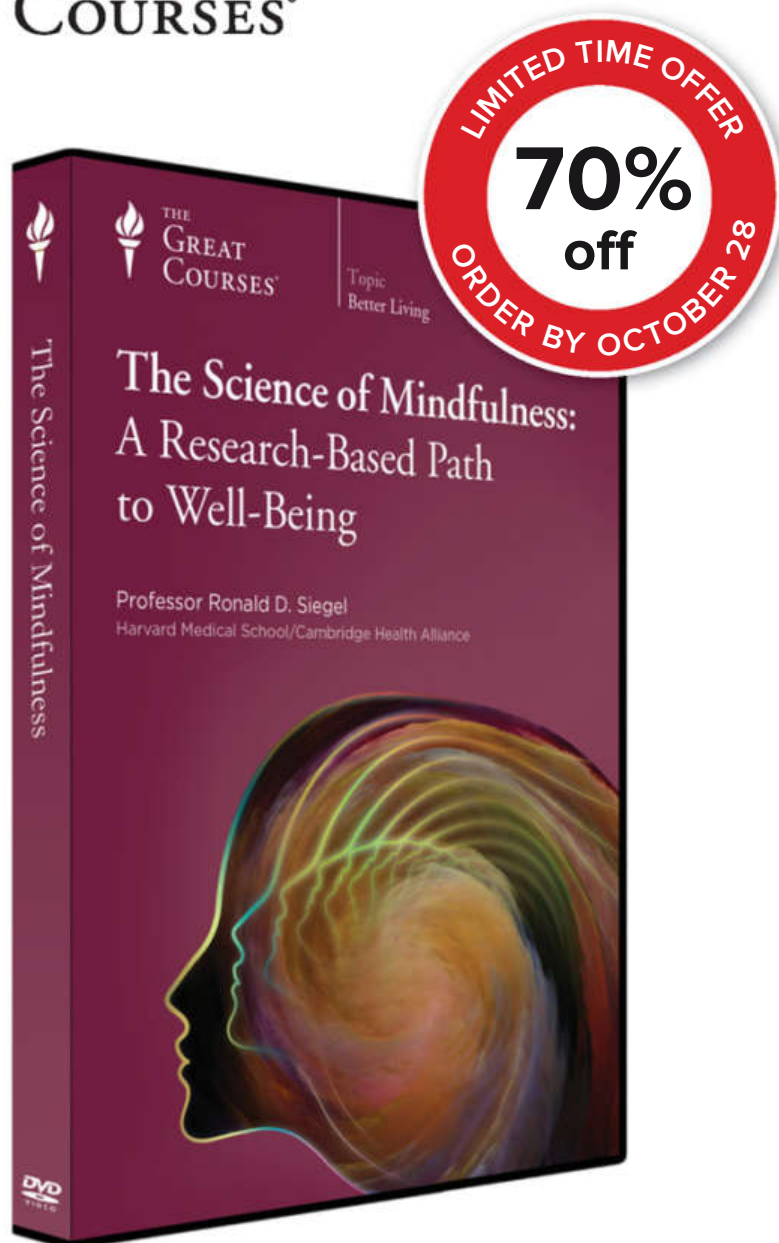
Here speaks the bishop, laying down his orthodox rule. But he is a benign bishop and he always finds a loophole in the law. The standard Auden review essay begins with a version of his anathema on delving into the lives of writers and proceeds to tell us why we can make an exception in this case. It is “dishonorable to read other people’s letters,” but Auden goes on to read Wilde’s with great acuity and sensitivity, making the excuse that Wilde was, after all, a show-off and would have wanted us to read his letters.

The publication of Max Beerbohm’s private letters is “a violation of personal privacy for which I can see no justification whatever,” but he goes on to write, brilliantly and at great length, about a biography that makes use of them. It is impossible, Auden claims, for a biography of Wagner to tell us anything about his music, but he goes on to write about one such biography, again brilliantly, because “the story of Wagner’s life is absolutely fascinating and it would be so if he had never written a note.”

This contradiction generates the somewhat odd sensation one has in reading Mendelson’s stupendous collections, which build new wings onto a *Complete Works* that is becoming one of the great achievements of current literary scholarship. Their comprehensive nature inevitably makes the heavy tomes at times more voluminous than luminous. But they make us equally grateful for showing us two entirely opposite tendencies in Auden’s writing—his ability to hold his tongue and his tendency to loosen it. We get a sufficient flavor of the crankiness of his general view of contemporary society to admire the self-awareness and self-restraint that allow him, for the most part, to keep those views to himself. If a gentleman is someone who can play the accordion but doesn’t, Auden’s gentility is that he is perfectly capable of playing the aging ranter but chooses not to. And on the other side, the reader can only be glad that Auden constantly breaks his own vows of silence, revealing things about other writers and about himself that, he sternly insists, must not be revealed. A bishop who never sinned against the commandments he espouses would be a dull fellow indeed.

These opposing pleasures make the volumes deeply contradictory. But we read them, after all, not for their intellectual coherence but because Auden is a great poet. For poets, contradictions are not mistakes. They are compulsory. □





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# The Strangely Conservative French

Mark Lilla

## How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People

by Sudhir Hazareesingh.  
Basic Books, 338 pp., \$29.99

Two and a half weeks after the Swedish Academy announced that the French novelist Patrick Modiano would receive the 2014 Nobel Prize for Literature, the French minister of culture, Fleur Pellerin, appeared on a popular television show to talk about herself and her work. She expressed pride that “France is again number one on the world stage of culture and the arts” and recounted her lunch earlier that day with Modiano, whom she found *sympathique*. “We laughed a lot.” The interviewer then asked her which of Modiano’s novels was her favorite. Pellerin gave a very long French *uhhhhhhh* before admitting “without any problem” that she had not read and did not know the titles of any of them. Since becoming minister she had had no time to read anything but memos, legal documents, and the news. “But you have to find time for it,” the shocked interviewer replied, “it’s important, *non?*” The minister grinned.

Pellerin’s reputation has not recovered. It’s been a long time since the minister of culture was expected to be an intellectual. The position was created by Charles de Gaulle in the 1950s at the urging of André Malraux, who held the post for a decade, and among his earlier successors were the novelist Maurice Druon, the essayist Alain Peyrefitte, and the journalist Françoise Giroud. But the politicians appointed today are at least expected to talk the talk, to know which intellectuals are in fashion, which exhibitions must be seen, where the summer cultural festivals are, and which novels they should pretend are on their night tables. They must be hypocrites, in the best sense of the term, rendering official homage to virtue. And sometimes it’s more than hypocrisy. President Georges Pompidou was a great lover of French poetry, recited it from memory during cabinet meetings, and published a superb anthology that is still widely read today.

Culture is a cult object in France. It has been estimated that about half of the French population is reading a book at some point every day, around two thousand book prizes are given out every year, and three thousand cultural festivals are held, often in splendid settings. Large government subsidies are given to public radio stations like France Culture, as well as to independent bookstores and countless little magazines. Some years ago the literary historian Marc Fumaroli, now a member of the Académie Française, published a blistering attack on this system, titled *L’État culturel* (The Cultural State). He did so, though, not on the grounds that it was elitist or cost too much, but in the name of high culture, arguing that government largesse and cultural bureaucracy stifled genuine creativity and independence.

Anti-intellectual populism à l’Américaine has no traction here. An example: ever since a new middle school reform was announced by the François Hollande government in the spring,

French intellectuals and politicians have been playing assigned roles in a kabuki drama about how many hours per week students should be studying what kind of history, and when Greek and Latin should be offered to them. The curriculum in France is set at the national level, which means that the president of one of the most powerful countries on earth must have a position on when *Le Misanthrope* should be taught and whether gym classes should last sixty or ninety minutes. And any respectable intellectual must have one too.

Does all this activity mean that the average French person is more cultured than his homologues in other European countries? That’s hard to say, given that what counts as being cultured varies from place to place. Literature is paramount in France, music in Germany, the visual arts in Italy. These implicit hierarchies shape other forms of cultural activity. In France philosophy is understood to be a kind of imaginative literature or poetic performance, while in Germany it has always had symphonic ambitions. (In Italy it consists in restoring old masterworks.) What strikes one in comparison with the United States and even Britain is how high middlebrow culture is across continental Europe; what strikes one in comparing these European countries with each other is the diversity of cultural styles. Which is why, ever since Madame de Staël wrote *De l’Allemagne* during Napoleon’s reign to celebrate the Germans as sensitive romantics allergic to tyranny (unlike the French), and Heinrich Heine responded with his own *De l’Allemagne* portraying them as brutal pagans capable of anything, Europeans have been trying to unlock the cultural codes of their neighbors—and, in so doing, unlock their own.

Sudhir Hazareesingh’s *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People* is a stimulating contribution to this literature. Born in Mauritius, Hazareesingh is a specialist in French politics at Oxford and the author of a highly regarded book on the legend of Napoleon. In this work he displays not only a deep familiarity with French society, but a rare sense for a foreigner of what really matters in French intellectual life once you dig below the surface. He is an excellent teller of tales with a good eye for the revealing anecdote. Here we learn about a French journalist who visited Descartes’s birthplace on the 350th anniversary of his death and ran into an old woman who expressed some pride in the philosopher’s intellectual achievements, but especially in the (imagined) fact that he was the “lover of a queen,” Christina of Sweden.

Hazareesingh knows that “intellectual excellence combined with sexual prowess” is the strongest aphrodisiac west of the Rhine. He also has a gift for the quick sketch, as in this perfect description of De Gaulle:

He was a man of order who became a rebel, a Bonapartist who disliked war, a republican whose style of rule was monarchical, a



André Malraux, France’s first minister of culture, Paris, 1968; photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson

radical reformer who appealed to conservatives, a melancholic spirit who constantly trumpeted his optimism, and a statesman who would have loved to be a writer.

That said, *How the French Think* gets off to a rough start. The title is catchy but the book’s scope is not as wide as it implies. Hazareesingh’s interests are mainly political and social, and he doesn’t venture into how the French think about, say, love, family, success, beauty, food, the future, or death, or how they might express their thoughts in forms other than writing. (There is little about film and nothing about television, which is now the biggest gear in the French culture machine.)

Then there is the introduction, which tries to summarize the whole book but only serves as an impediment, piling up too many themes in detail, leaving the impression that the author is unwittingly attributing everything and its contrary to the French: that they are rationalists and dreamers, that their thinking is both binary and “holistic” (a term he uses frequently without defining it), lucid and imaginative, precise and abstract, Cartesian and Derridian.

But once he gets over this hurdle the chapters begin to make sense. One discovers that Hazareesingh is laying out these oppositions for a reason: he wants to show us that the French mind, like any mind, has different sides and that what makes it French is when and how any particular side is revealed. The first half of *How the French Think* is a kind of collective brain scan, something richer than a conventional portrait of national character. (The second half is almost a separate book, as we’ll see.)

Magnum Photos

We start, predictably enough, with Descartes. Ever since the eighteenth century the French have been praised and denounced as rationalists, including by themselves. Throughout the nineteenth century Descartes was claimed, plausibly, as a precursor by anticlerical dogmatists, grand intellectual system builders like Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, and republican historians trying to construct a useful past for modern democratic government. He was also denounced by Catholic thinkers as the serpent in the garden who spread doubt about revealed truths, making him the real father of the French Revolution.

But Descartes is a mythical symbol that can be invoked in almost any situation and by the most surprising people. Just after World War II Maurice Thorez, leader of the French Communist Party, declared that the author of the *Discourse on Method* “teaches us hope and confidence, faith in human intelligence, a love for the all-conquering power of labor.” A few years later a fellow-traveling author wrote that “there is no one more ‘Cartesian’ than Stalin,” meaning the highest form of praise. More recently a horticulturalist developed a rose named after Descartes, calling it “an international rose, serious in its behavior and Latin in its color.”

So are “clear and distinct ideas” characteristically French? Perhaps. But then so is fascination with mysticism and the occult. In the book’s best chapter Hazareesingh takes us on a tour of the dark side, beginning with the strange Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, a nobleman and self-styled theosophist born in 1743 whose mystical philosophical writings found an influential audience in the decades leading up to the Revolution—so influential that for some time he was thought to have been the author of the revolutionary slogan *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. This fascination continues. It turns out that the arch-socialist François Mitterrand was in the habit of consulting a former model and starlet who had set up shop as an astrologist (and who may have been his lover). As she reports in her



memoirs, he had her draw up astrological profiles of potential political appointees and during the first Gulf War would sometimes call her twice a day for a reading of the stars. He even asked her advice on when to hold the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, in the end choosing September 20 as a particularly auspicious day. (The treaty barely passed.)

But even secular French thinkers immune to mysticism have been obsessed by religion, to the extent that they invented their own. To put it in psychological terms, the French have never gotten over killing God during the Enlightenment, and cope with it in one of two ways: by ritually reenacting the murder through radical atheism, or by searching for something to fill the now empty tabernacle. It was counter-revolutionary thinkers like Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald who first spoke of the spiritual vacuum created by the Revolution and of society's need to fill it, one of the most potent and consequential ideas in nineteenth-century European thought. Few know that it can be traced from these Catholic reactionaries all the way down to the sociology of Emile Durkheim in France and well beyond today.

In his later years Saint-Simon, the futurist prophet of a utopian industrial society, also began speaking of the need to create a "new Christianity," which for him meant a godless, humanistic social morality. After his death some of his followers withdrew to a commune in the Paris neighborhood of Ménilmontant where they lived like a cult devoted to this religion and could be identified by their clothing, which was always buttoned in back (thus requiring social cooperation to get dressed). Auguste Comte, once Saint-Simon's secretary, went so far as to create a religious calendar where every day was a feast day devoted to an important thinker. He also developed a list of sacraments that included one to be held several years after a person's death, "incorporating" him or her into the cosmos.

Some of Comte's Brazilian followers went around building Temples of Humanity, one of which still holds weekly services in Rio de Janeiro, and another in Paris that can still be visited. And then there was the more than half-mad utopian Charles Fourier, whose mountain of writings contain detailed (Cartesian) plans for communal "phalansteries," organized down to the last detail, that would be held together by a (mystical) religion of love and sexual desire.

It's refreshing to read a book that recognizes this French double-mindedness. Hazareesingh is also good on the complexities of the French political psychology. He recognizes that the distinction between the left and the right is about more than ideas, that the Revolution created two political families with different cultures that survived intact until the 1960s: one Catholic, comfortable with authority, and appealing to the idea of the nation; the other secular, slightly anarchistic, and appealing to the Republic or, further to the left, *le peuple*. In one family you celebrated the Fête de Jeanne d'Arc in May, in the other you attended the Communist Fête de l'Humanité in September. All the two families shared was a detestation of the bourgeoisie.

It would have been good, though, to have Hazareesingh's thoughts on how these cultural distinctions have broken

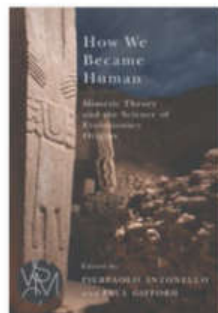
down since the 1960s, as church attendance declined, a neoliberal right appeared, former working-class Communist voters turned to the xenophobic National Front, and a post-1960s bobo left grew up outside the traditional parties, focusing on humanitarianism and antiracism, and finding a home in newer media outlets like the newspaper *Libération*, the television station Canal Plus, and today the news site Mediapart.

He does remark on the enduring French distaste for ordinary politics and attraction to leaders promising to raise them above their petty squabbling and unify the nation. Though France is one of the most atheistic nations on earth—surpassed only by Japan, China, and, oddly, the Czech Republic—it has always revered political messiahs: Napoleon, Boulanger, Pétain, De Gaulle, Mitterrand. (As a British historian of France once pointed out to me, the French like their messiahs to be either very, very tall, or very, very short.) The French are by nature impatient and when they fall behind other nations they dream of a *grand bond en avant* that will put them back in the lead. In the face of the oil crisis of the early 1970s President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing famously declared that "France has no oil, but it has ideas!" A few years later he fell victim to a complex hoax involving a Belgian count, an Italian inventor, and Opus Dei, concerning a secret project to develop an oil-sniffing plane that had been presented to him by officials of a state-controlled petroleum company. Over \$150 million were spent clandestinely on the project before the government recognized the scam—and quickly covered it up. France was left without the promised oil and one less bright idea.

The first half of *How the French Think* ends with an insightful discussion of what holds the nation together, in particular the increasingly mythical notion of *la France profonde* rooted in small towns and regions. (Although almost all those in the political class are educated in a few select schools in Paris and spend their entire adult lives there, it is important at election time to invoke one's real or imagined provincial roots, appear at agricultural fairs, drink pastis with the locals, and resist checking your text messages.) But then what seems like a second book begins. Abandoning the brain scan approach to French thinking, Hazareesingh adopts a more conventional historical approach, telling the somewhat familiar story of French intellectual disputes over politics running from Jean-Paul Sartre down to the present.

For those who don't already know this story, Hazareesingh is a good guide. He begins with Sartre's and Camus's existentialism and the very different political lessons they drew from it, moves to the rise of a politically ambiguous structuralism and post-structuralism based in the universities (which soon became a cargo cult in the United States), then to Maoist radicalism growing out of the events of May 1968, and finally the splash made by the antitotalitarian "new philosophers" of the late 1970s. He disdains "the transience of intellectual fashions" in this period and the sacerdotal role the media class bestowed on one thinker after another, along with the expectation that they would have articulate and "interesting"

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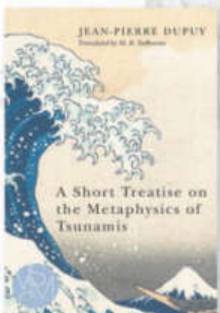


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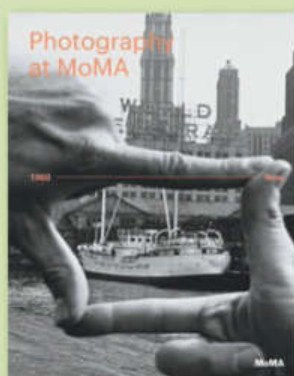
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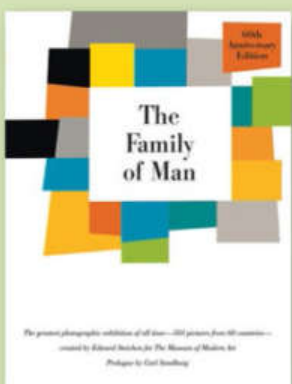
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positions on just about every subject, without deigning to master any of them. Sartre has a lot to answer for, in his view.

Yet Hazareesingh isn't happy with what followed either. Beginning in the 1980s a more liberal (in the Anglo-American sense) strain of French political thought developed under the influence of Raymond Aron and the historian François Furet, who reoriented attention away from Marxism and structuralism toward Tocqueville's writings on democracy. This also marked a change in intellectual comportment. Rather than sign petitions or publish yet another dramatic *J'accuse!*, these liberals were more likely to write articles in new reviews like *Le Débat* on particular social problems and public policies to address them. As the coeditor of *Le Débat* Marcel Gauchet put it, the time had come for "the promotion of real values against false ones, analysis against clichés, reasoning rather than sloganeering, the sense of difficulty against the dictatorship of facility"—all of which, on Hazareesingh's account, were lacking among the postwar French political intellectuals.

During the 1980s antitotalitarian liberalism became not only respectable—Sartre had once famously stated that "all anti-Communists are dogs"—it seemed to receive history's benediction with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the regimes of its satellite nations. For some time Furet had been arguing that "the French Revolution is over"—by which he meant that the problems facing France's settled democratic society could no longer be understood by referring to the revolutionary intellectual tradition that had given birth to Marxism. He even published a book with two collaborators titled *La République du centre* (The Republic of the Center) in which he argued that France had finally become a normal postindustrial democratic society and that its politics would no longer be determined by the old ideological families of revolutionary left and reactionary right.

By the mid-1990s that seemed a questionable judgment. After Prime Minister Alain Juppé announced relatively moderate reforms in the welfare state in 1995 he was met with large-scale demonstrations and strikes, the biggest since May '68, and out of those movements a new kind of intellectual left emerged, led by figures like the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and centered in provincial universities around the country.

Hazareesingh, who seems to be one of those liberals who needs to feel he's just to the left of himself, treats this as a significant and even welcome development. But this newest left, which has equivalents across Europe, is little more than a pantomime movement of bourgeois hipsters aping media-shaped images of the barricades and drawing inspiration from intellectual performance artists like Slavoj Žižek and the neo-Communist philosopher Alain Badiou. The most comical example of this tendency is the self-styled Comité Invisible, which publishes handsome little pamphlets about the coming revolution, but remains anonymous because, you know, it's dangerous out there. (It does, however, maintain a Facebook page.) These groups have no influence whatever on public opinion or electoral politics. The real challenge to the Furet thesis of a centrist republic since the 1990s has come from the National

Front on the right, whose members are proud to sign anything they write.

*How the French Think* ends on a somber note, for the very good reason that ever since the euphoria of the early 1990s passed the French have felt a malaise. It shows up in public opinion surveys, in the media, in learned books. "Even idiots have now stopped being happy," Hazareesingh quotes someone saying. What is it about? What isn't it about, one is tempted to answer. Unemployment, labor laws that make hiring hard, the overbearing strength of Europe, the weakness of Europe, the lack of innovation, the sense that too much is changing, the mediocrity and insularity of the political class, schools that are too demanding, schools that aren't demanding enough—for two decades now this self-contradictory litany has been repeated. Add to it the very real challenge of political Islamism and the social conditions in which it flourishes and the picture can look bleak.

But Hazareesingh is right to argue that moroseness is a kind of collective psychological syndrome in France that has flared up in the past, most dramatically in the decades between the world wars. It induces a kind of intellectual posturing and political passivity that reinforce each other. It also, I would add, restores impotent dreams of a *grand bond en avant* to escape the present.

America looms large in these dreams. The anti-Americanism of the past that portrayed the United States—or, with Britain, the "Anglo-Saxons"—as a bloodthirsty empire of cultural barbarians is less palpable than it used to be, and there are generally warm feelings for the chief of the Anglo-Saxon tribes, Barack Obama. Today one rather has the impression that many think the way for France to recover its vitality is for it to become half-American—so long as they can choose which half. Some fantasize about Silicon Valleys springing up across the country (but with government seed money and strong labor regulations), others fantasize about France developing a more open and daring culture (but with high taxes to make sure no one makes any money from it), and others still fantasize about Paris becoming a center of world finance (without anyone having to work on Sundays). Authors of recent books on the French malaise can be divided into California dreamers and those in a New York state of mind.

But France will never be America for the simple reason that it is a deeply conservative country, perhaps the most conservative in Europe. Despite their radical tradition in politics and the arts, what unifies the French across the political spectrum today is their distrust of change. (This, perhaps more than any idealism about Europe, was behind the extraordinary recent efforts of François Hollande to keep Greece within the eurozone under just about any conditions.) The truth is that the French like the way they are; if presented with the set of all genuinely possible worlds most would undoubtedly choose the one they find themselves in. One can't help thinking that if the French were able to recognize themselves for what they are, and the advantages of being that way, they would deal with their problems moderately but steadily. That would not be terribly interesting intellectually, but it might restore their *joie de vivre*. □



# Were Top American Leaders... Royalists?

John Brewer

## The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding

by Eric Nelson.

Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 390 pp., \$29.95

The powers of the executive branch are under fierce scrutiny. President Obama's use of an executive order to modify the enforcement of immigration laws has been opposed by twenty-four states challenging the legality of his actions, federal judge Arthur Schwab has unilaterally issued a judgment striking down the executive order, while in the blogosphere Obama is being adversely compared to the autocratic Stuart monarch Charles I.\*

Over in Britain it has recently been revealed that the queen and Prince Charles, the heir to the throne, have been asked by ministers to approve or veto bills debated in the House of Commons, and that in 1999 the queen vetoed a bill concerning military actions against Iraq, a piece of legislation opposed by the government that would have removed her power to authorize military strikes and transferred it to the House of Commons.

These instances of executive interference with the processes and enforcement of legislation have had a long and contentious history in the politics of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain and North America. The issue of the royal "prerogative," the special powers of the monarch to take unilateral and unaccountable action in the public interest—the right to suspend, dispense with, or veto legislation, to appoint and dismiss ministers, to make war and treaties—was at the heart of the struggles between the Stuart monarchs and their parliaments; it unleashed rebellion, civil war, and revolution in the seventeenth century. The historical memory of these bitter conflicts ran deep in the Anglophone Atlantic world of the eighteenth century and colored the struggles between the British and the thirteen colonies. For more than forty years, scholarship on the American Revolution has emphasized the close connection between colonial ideas and the beliefs and attitudes of those—the parliamentarians and the Whigs—who had opposed the crown more than a century earlier.

Eric Nelson, a professor at Harvard, in his brilliant and provocative analysis of the American Revolution, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*, is equally insistent that the Revolution can only be understood in the light of patriots' passionate commitment to seventeenth-century political ideas. But he departs radically from his predecessors, arguing that it was admiration for royal prerogative power and belief in the virtues of a strong executive, both derived

from seventeenth-century precedents, that fostered the rebellion against Britain and shaped the Constitution of the new American republic. His Revolution comes out of a royalist, not a parliamentarian, tradition.

*The Royalist Revolution* is a book of great intellectual power: it is not just challenging but erudite (many of its abundant footnotes are brilliant short essays in their own right), and, though densely argued, is written with admirable clarity and fairness. Yet Nelson's oxymoronic and attention-grabbing title speaks to some fundamental problems in his version of the American

maintained that sovereignty lay with a legislative body representing the people. "It was for the sake of this constitutional theory that a great many British Americans rebelled." While patriot royalists, as Nelson concedes, were only "a subset of those who led the patriot cause," their importance lies in the way they transformed their royalist thinking prior to American independence into a vigorous case for the sort of powerful chief executive that Nelson believes was written into the American Constitution of 1787. As he concludes, "the president of the United States does in reality what the king of

ity, but was strongly backed by historical accounts—published just before this period—of the parliamentary debates of the 1620s. During that time the Stuart monarchs had asserted their just prerogative rights, their "superintending power," over the colonies, and explicitly denied parliamentary jurisdiction.

How then had this royal power been eroded over the succeeding 150 years? As Edward Bancroft, the physician and future British spy, whom Nelson sees as a founding father of royalist patriotism, explained in his *Remarks on the Review of the Controversy between Great Britain and Her Colonies*,

published in 1769, Parliament had usurped royal authority after the execution of Charles I by passing a succession of Navigation Acts that regulated imperial commerce through parliamentary statute. And after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had more generally curbed and depleted the powers of the monarch, the royal veto of legislation fell into abeyance, while the crown's control of Parliament and the military had been curbed by its dependence on Parliament for annual supply and for the passage of martial law. The revolutionary cause was therefore also a royal cause. As one correspondent put it in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of May 1774:

Remember, my dear Countrymen, we are contending for the Crown and the Prerogative of our King, as well as for Liberty—Property and Life.—The British Parliament has violated the Constitution, in usurping his *supreme* Jurisdiction over us.

Hence the repeated calls of the Patriots on George III to exert his prerogative powers, and join with his loyal American subjects in opposing the excessive claims of Parliament.

The royalist case, Nelson argues, was sustained by a particular theory of representation that legitimized and encouraged royal power by claiming that the monarch, rather than the House of Commons, was the true representative of the people. This theory, Nelson argues, "denied that being a good 'representation,' or image, of the people was either necessary or sufficient to establish the legitimacy of a representative." Instead it insisted that any person or body "authorized by the people to exercise political power over them could be said to be their representative, whether a single person or an assembly (or some combination of the two)." Patriot royalism denied that any colony had ever authorized Parliament to act on its behalf and, in its clearest statement, claimed that therefore only the monarch was able to act on the colonies' behalf, through powers derived from the colonial charters that, as Nelson puts it, "divided political authority between a monarch invested with sweeping prerogative powers and the elected legislatures of each American dominion."

Once again, this view harked back to the seventeenth-century struggles



An 1829 engraving of the Sons of Liberty pulling down a statue of King George III at the Bowling Green, New York, in July 1776

Revolution and the debate about the new nation's state and federal constitutions. The problem lies less in the particular details of his account than it does in an issue of which the Founding Fathers were well aware, namely that of how a central issue was "framed." How good a general description is the idea of a "royalist revolution"?

Nelson argues that first in the 1760s and 1770s, when the patriots were developing arguments against the British government's determination to uphold its right to tax and regulate the thirteen colonies, then during the debates about state constitutions after independence, and again in the debates around the new federal constitution, a group of Americans—notably Edward Bancroft, Alexander Hamilton, James Wilson, John Adams, James Iredell, and Benjamin Rush—consistently argued in favor of prerogative (exclusive right or privilege) and executive power. Though they had their differences, the political identity of these "royalist revolutionaries" was defined by what Nelson calls "patriot royalism," a "cluster of commitments" intended in all circumstances to ensure the place of a powerful executive as part of good governance.

But why were these revolutionaries "royalist"? Because, Nelson maintains, their enthusiasm for executive power was fueled by seventeenth-century arguments in favor of Stuart royal powers and prerogatives that had been intended to rebut Whig and republican parliamentarianism, which

Great Britain does only in theory. This was the great victory of the Royalist Revolution."

Nelson's starting point is the idea, first mooted by colonists in the 1760s and 1770s, of what historians have long called the "dominion theory" of empire—the notion that Britain's colonies owed allegiance to the British crown by virtue of their royal charters, but not to the English Parliament, which therefore had no right to tax or regulate them.

George III, in this view, was a monarch over many distinct jurisdictions, many of which had their own assemblies for making their own laws and regulations. The prerogative of the crown, not parliamentary statute, governed relations between the colonies and the Mother Country. (This view involved a strong statement of colonial legislative power and not just an assertion of royal prerogative.) Having begun by conceding parliamentary jurisdiction over them, the colonists had been pushed into this position after the British legislature had gradually closed all the loopholes and exceptions—no taxation without representation, no internal regulation—claimed by the American patriots, and asserted its categorical right to regulate the colonies in the Declaratory Act of 1766, whose heading made its purpose abundantly clear: "An Act for the better securing the dependency of his Majesty's dominions in America upon the crown and parliament of Great Britain."

Nelson points out that "dominion theory" was not just a politically expedient way to deny parliamentary author-

\*See, for instance, "Executive Powers, Barack Obama v. Charles I of England," [www.freerepublic.com](http://www.freerepublic.com), August 4, 2014. For additional footnotes, see the Web version of this article at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).



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between crown and Parliament, when the apologists for royal power tried to rebut the republican enemies of Charles I, like Henry Parker, who maintained that the only legitimate representative for the people was a representative of the people, a sort of miniature likeness or resemblance of the whole political nation.

From this point of view, the American crisis could have been resolved if George III, as his loyal American subjects urged him to, had taken up his legitimate prerogative powers to overturn parliamentary intervention in America. In fact King George's only act of prerogative toward America was to issue a proclamation in August 1775 condemning the "treasons and traitorous Conspiracies" against the crown, and calling on all his subjects "to suppress such Rebellion, and to bring the Traitors to Justice."

The patriot idea that George III was somehow going to rescue the colonies from the thrall of Parliament through the use of his prerogative power seems either ill-informed, dim-witted, or disingenuous. What exactly was the course of events that the Americans envisioned? That the king would invoke his prerogative power to suspend or dispense parliamentary legislation—something that was made explicitly illegal by the Bill of Rights of 1689? That the king would remove his current ministers and appoint those who were in favor of the view that parliamentary jurisdiction did not extend to the New World? George could have legally done this, but which members of the political class did "the royalists" have in mind as sympathizers with the colonists?

The only group of British politicians who were advocates of a more active personal rule by the king—the group of courtiers that Edmund Burke identified as "the King's Friends" and whose politics were often described as "Stuart"—were also the most hostile to American claims to relative autonomy. Sympathizers with America, like the followers of John Wilkes or William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, saw the problem as a matter of overweening monarchical power. No political group within Britain (including those most hostile to the monarch) thought for a moment that he would use his prerogative powers on behalf of the colonists.

The oft-repeated patriot argument that the monarch was entitled to use his prerogative powers to redress the colonists' grievances was matched—at least from the material that Nelson cites—by a remarkable absence of concrete and specific suggestions about what King George should do. Talk of the royal veto was all very well, but most of the legislation the colonists wished vetoed had already been enacted. If the colonists had been real royalists—of the sort that had repeatedly affirmed the royal prerogative up to and even after it had been curbed during the Glorious Revolution of 1688—they would have urged the legitimacy of the king's suspending or dispensing powers, encouraging George to abrogate parliamentary legislation. But they did not. If they espoused royalism, it was of the milquetoast variety.

It is this, as much as a natural skepticism or unwillingness to abandon a "Whig" narrative of the Revolution, that explains, I think, the conventional wisdom that the patriots were developing arguments about empire as a dominion rather than a parliamentary

jurisdiction chiefly in order to legitimize their case. Calls for the king to take the colonists' part and to escape the thrall of his ministers merely repeated a well-worn cliché of patriot opposition.

Yet Nelson is surely correct in seeing that some patriots, temporarily drowned out by the backlash against the king in person and by the powerful effect of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, with its denunciation of kingship derived from scripture, continued to adhere to a view that saw executive authority as vital to a legitimate and orderly regime. But as Nelson concedes, figures such as John Adams were in retreat during the early years of state constitution-making. Only South Carolina had given its governor a veto; everyone else, including the unicameral Pennsylvania, entrusted their govern-



George III as the king of Brobdingnag  
and Napoleon as Gulliver;  
etching by James Gillray, 1803

nors only with the power to execute laws passed by the legislature. Only gradually, and in the 1780s, did the arguments of the patriot royalists again begin to carry weight.

It is at this point in Nelson's narrative that we become increasingly aware that patriot royalism was not the only patriot game in town. "It would be highly misleading," writes Nelson,

to talk about the principles of the American Revolution... The patriots who led the opposition to Britain and waged the Revolutionary War had agreed on a small number of central claims—that the British constitution had become hopelessly corrupt, that the colonists were not represented in Parliament, and so on—but they had disagreed sharply, and fatefully, among themselves as to precisely why or in what sense these claims were correct.

"Conventional whigs," both in Britain and the Americas, blamed an excess of royal power, the spread of influence and corruption, and stood by a view of the legislature as the representative of the people; patriot royalists blamed overweening legislative power for the crisis and stood by a designated view of representation, one that allowed that the head of the executive could also represent the people. These two versions of politics, which Nelson insists "do not straightforwardly map" onto the categories "Federalist" and "Antifederalist," were at the heart of the debates about the Constitution, discussions that Nelson claims focused overwhelmingly on the powers of the president.

In the struggle, patriot royalism eventually triumphed over republicanism, ensuring a powerful executive branch in the form of a president with a veto. No wonder that Mercy Otis Warren concluded that what the Constitution had created was "a Republican form of government, founded on the principles of monarchy," or, as Edmund Randolph put it more graphically, "the foetus of monarchy."

Nelson's account of the unfolding events of the revolutionary crisis and the arguments it generated is written in two rather different registers that nicely illustrate J. H. Hexter's famous distinction between historians who are either "splitters" or "lumpers." The splitter in Nelson is concerned with the niceties of political argument, with the subtle adjudication of the many differences among the different factions, and with gradual and fine-grained shifts of opinion. It is here that he is at his best, deftly elucidating the similarities and differences between Wilson, John Adams, Hamilton, and Jefferson. His discussion reminds us once again of the astonishing fecundity and variety of political thinking in the lead-up to and aftermath of independence, when all sorts of schemes were mooted.

But Nelson's second, lumping register is more emphatic. This is one in which the frequent reiteration of the term "patriot royalism" almost seems to elevate it into a transhistorical ideal into which Nelson wishes to squeeze his arguments. We are presented with two great historical moments, one in the seventeenth century, one toward the end of the eighteenth, in which a great Manichaean struggle is fought between, on the one hand, constitutional or "patriot royalism" and, on the other, "parliamentary republicanism." This account of a clear struggle makes me uneasy, perhaps because as a political historian I prefer the messiness of political history to the clarity of the history of political thought, but also because I find Nelson's account parsimonious, inadequate to the complex range of positions that the two conflicts contained.

In connecting American eighteenth-century patriot royalism to its precursors, Nelson sets great store by what he calls seventeenth-century royalist constitutionalism. As he indicates, the urtext here is the so-called *Answer to the XIX Propositions of Both Houses of Parliament* (1642), a response to Parliament's challenge to Charles I's powers of appointment and right to veto legislation. While the king's apologists vigorously defended his prerogatives, they also built their case around a theory of mixed government, in which law was made by the combined body of king, Lords, and Commons. These bodies represented the three estates of "absolute monarchy," "aristocracy," and "democracy." Each in its pure form had its "particular conveniences and inconveniences," but when combined together they acted to check one another, making the English constitutional arrangements the best available sort of government. According to the royal *Answer*, the Commons and Lords seemed to be setting themselves up as the final source of authority, pushing the king out of mixed government. "You must admit Us [i.e., the monarch]," the king and his followers claimed, "to be a part of the Parliament."



It is critically important to understand that this view of mixed government or royal constitutionalism had a complex and checkered history between its formulation in 1642 and the outbreak of the American Revolution. The *Answer to the XIX Propositions of Both Houses of Parliament* accidentally conceded that king, Lords, and Commons were coordinate law-making powers—that the king in Parliament was the nation's sovereign body—and almost from the day it was first published, many royalists condemned this statement for ceding or sharing supreme power with the Lords and Commons.

For much of the rest of the seventeenth century, royalists grappled to undo what they thought of as the harm this concession had done to their cause. As one of them, Thomas Turner, described it in the 1670s, it was “that poisonous tenet of the coordination of the two houses with the kings of England in the power legislative.” Perhaps this does not matter for Nelson's argument—his royalists are *constitutional* royalists—though it does remind us that “royalism” came in many stripes, and that the term had political associations with the idea of the unconstrained power of the king, which reemerged strongly in the revolutionary debate.

More germane, however, is the way that in the debates over the Constitution mixed government was loosened from its royalist moorings, and used as an argument against both royal absolutism (which is why many royalists saw Charles's *Answer* as an error) and against republican claims for the absolute sovereignty of the representative of the people. This version of republicanism—that the British constitution was a system of laws in which all shared—became in the eighteenth century not a royalist view but the foundation stone of mainstream Whiggery. Mixed government was seen as a mechanism to prevent overweening power whatever its source, whether exerted by the monarch or the House of Commons.

Such mixed government was never a royalist monopoly—indeed it was often invoked by parliamentary moderates, including those who fought against the king in the seventeenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century it had become a political cliché, what the Earl of Chatham called this “common schoolboy position.” You did not need to be a royalist to criticize excessive parliamentary power in the 1760s and 1770s, because you already had at hand a thoroughly familiar set of arguments, admittedly with a royalist genealogy, but now usually thought of as species of Whiggery. Using Nelson's criteria it would be easy to show that a good many British politicians and commentators were constitutional royalists, a description that they would have regarded as absurd.

And as Gordon Wood has emphasized in an earlier exchange with Nelson over his royalist thesis, the real problem for the colonists was the marriage of the idea of mixed government with the idea of parliamentary sovereignty. Though Charles and his followers were probably not advancing such a theory in 1642, from the mid-seventeenth century onward a steady stream of commentators, like the famous Sir William Blackstone, embraced both mixed government and the idea that the king-in-

parliament was an absolute sovereign body. The omniscience of this belief, in Wood's view, pushed the colonists toward a view of imperial dominion. The issue was the scope of jurisdiction, not the nature of governance.

In short, Nelson's account of the heroic struggle between royalist constitutionalism and parliamentary republicanism occludes a middle ground that was less likely to disagree over the fundamentals of power than to debate how they were fairly distributed. Of course in the battle over the constitution of the new nation there were republicans who saw legitimate sovereign power in a representative body, and others whose desire for a strong executive was derived from their reading of British history as the story of the decline of monarchical executive power.

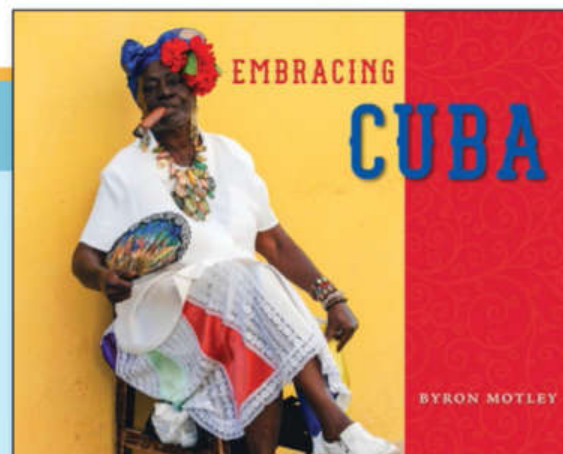
Some, like Alexander Hamilton, were loyalist in the way that Nelson describes, but others, like John Adams, were simply expressing a commitment to a mixed constitution of balanced powers in a remarkably orthodox fashion. Adams, indeed, was quite explicit about the requirement for a limited prerogative, and that such powers as the monarch had derived from the people.

Nelson places great store in the idea that for patriot royalists even a hereditary ruler can be a representative—or part of a representative—of the people but, again, this is not an especially radical notion (except in the eyes of a unicameral republican), provided that the hereditary ruler is part of a system of mixed government. The crucial issue is not what kind of executive he is, but how he fits into a system of powers. It is not prerogative as such that is the issue, but rather what sort of configuration of powers best ensures that the parts of the legislature interact in a way that most effectively prevents the abuse of power and the pursuit of particular interests, thereby helping secure the public good.

Of course that discussion was polarized, especially around the writing of the new republic's constitution, but a more satisfying account of the debates that Nelson analyzes would set out a more nuanced picture of the range of views and opinions forged during the almost thirty years of political crisis. He certainly uncovers the material for such an analysis, and does so brilliantly, but too often forces too much of his material onto the procrustean bed of patriot royalism. What emerges as he describes the efforts of his “patriot royalists” to formulate a new political order is the exceptional difficulty they had in freeing themselves from the forms of a British political system that many of them admired and saw as ideal, what Adams called “the most stupendous fabrick of human invention” and what Hamilton described as “the best in the world.”

One could hardly think of a better example of the anxiety of influence, a feeling that enhanced their awareness of the difficulty, enormity, and uncertainty of their forbidding task. Such patriots had, no doubt, their different ideas of this ideal political order, but what they were all committed to was a notion of mixed government, a system that constrained power (whoever and however it was exercised), established the rule of law, and worked toward a common good. □

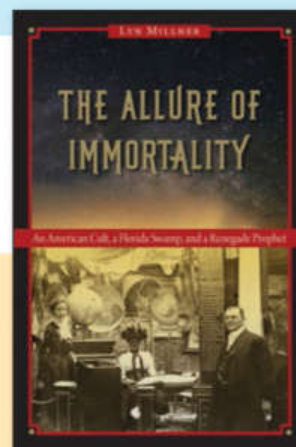
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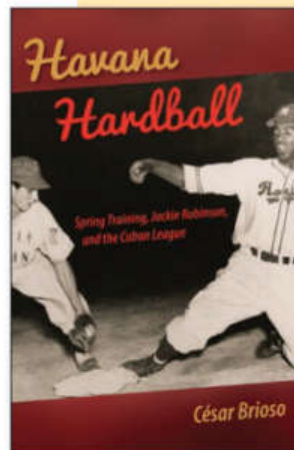
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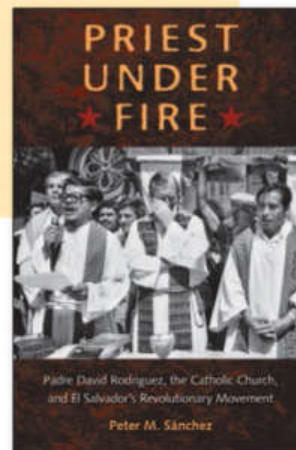
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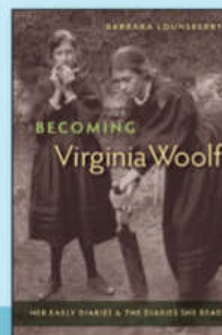


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# The Brother of the ‘Stranger’

Claire Messud

## The Meursault Investigation

by Kamel Daoud, translated from the French by John Cullen. Other Press, 143 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

Kamel Daoud’s novel *The Meursault Investigation* may have attracted more international attention than any other debut in recent years. The Algerian writer’s book, first published in French in Algeria in 2013, then in France in 2014 (where it won the Goncourt First Novel Prize and was runner-up for the Prix Goncourt itself), then admirably translated into English by John Cullen and published here in the late spring, has been widely acclaimed in France, North America, and the UK as an “instant classic” (to cite *The Guardian*).

Daoud is an influential and controversial journalist who writes for *Le Quotidien d’Oran*, in the city on Algeria’s Mediterranean coast where he lives. Since last December he has been under a fatwa declared, on Facebook, by the Salafist cleric Abdelfatah Hamadache. This followed an interview on French television in which Daoud criticized Muslim orthodoxy and said that he considered himself Algerian rather than Arab.\* Azadeh Moaveni, writing for the *Financial Times*, called Daoud’s book “perhaps the most important novel to emerge out of the Middle East in recent memory.”

*The Meursault Investigation*—called in French *Meursault, contre-enquête*, or counter-investigation—is a response to Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*. Narrated by an aging drinker named Harun, the account conflates Meursault and his creator and presents the infamous fictional murder of “the Arab” on a sun-drenched beach as if it were a real crime worthy of a police inquiry. Harun’s aim is to tell the “true” circumstances of that story and its legacy, from his own perspective. In Camus’s book, he points out, “the word ‘Arab’ appears twenty-five times, but not a single name, not once.” Harun wants his listener to understand that the dead man had a name and a family, neither of which figure in Camus’s novel. “Just think, we’re talking about one of the most read books in the world,” he muses. “My brother might have been famous if your author had merely deigned to give him a name.”

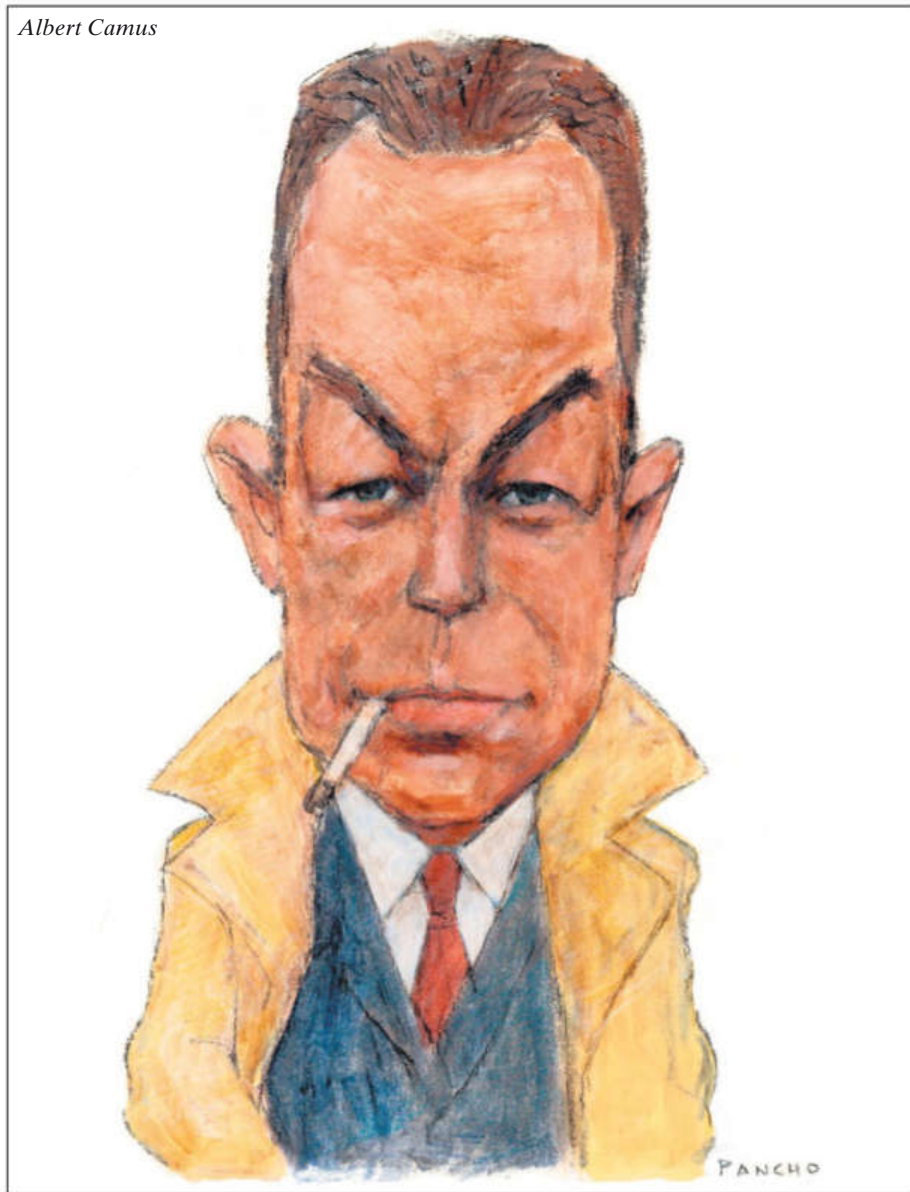
Meursault’s victim was in fact, Harun explains, his older brother Musa (Moses). Harun himself was only seven at the time of the crime (in 1942), and recalls that “everything revolved around Musa, and Musa revolved around our father, whom I never knew and who left me nothing but our family name.” As a result of the tragedy, his mother “imposed on me a strict duty of reincarnation”; serving the memory of his lost brother and his mother’s need to preserve it, he writes that he “had a ghost’s childhood.”

The novel is the poignant account of a man whose life has been warped, from the beginning, by his mother’s legacy of rage and grief. This is a fa-

miliar theme of postcolonial literature and one that Daoud will shape into a critique of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Algeria, a country that, in Harun’s view, is not much better off than in its previous incarnation. Harun, sitting on a barstool and chatting with a foreigner, speaks openly about Algeria, his brother, and his own

But the novel engages primarily with *The Stranger*, the outlines of which define Harun’s story. Not only is Musa Meursault’s victim; Harun himself, like Meursault, has a murder to deal with, as well as a difficult mother and a firm hostility to organized religion. Harun’s childhood was shaped by his mother’s mythmaking about her lost elder son:

Albert Camus



life story. His secularist, sophisticated reflections would seem to echo those of his creator. Daoud’s complex and thoughtful analysis is inescapably tied to the thought and work of his French colonial predecessor—also a controversial journalist, whose youthful work forced him into exile in France.

From Daoud’s first sentence—“Mama’s still alive today”—the novel is a dialogue with Camus; the first sentence of *The Stranger* is “*Aujourd’hui, maman est morte*.” But Daoud, who is both erudite and playful in spirit, samples and riffs upon not only Camus’s most celebrated novel but on his entire work and his life. Unburdening himself over several nights to his unnamed interlocutor at a bar, Harun recalls Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the protagonist of *The Fall*; he laments “the absurdity of my condition, which consisted in pushing a corpse to the top of a hill before it rolled back down, endlessly,” a reference to Camus’s philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Even Harun’s fatherless childhood in Algiers echoes that of Camus, who had no memories of his father, killed in the first days of World War I when Camus was an infant.

She wouldn’t describe a murder and a death, she’d evoke a fantastic transformation, one that turned a simple young man from the poorer quarters of Algiers into an invincible, long-awaited hero, a kind of savior.

She was, as Harun puts it, a peasant “snatched away from her tribe, given in marriage to a husband who didn’t know her and hastened to get away from her.” She inhabited a different world from that of the French colonials who ruled Algeria or of the Algerian government that has followed: “I don’t know my mother’s age, just as she has no idea how old I am. Before Independence, people did without exact dates; the rhythms of life were marked by births, epidemics, food shortages, et cetera.” The cultural gulf between Harun’s mother’s perspective, based on myths, and the Western views of Meursault/Camus is vast, reminiscent of the gulf between Petrus, a black, polygamist South African farmer, and the white Lurie family in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. In Coetzee’s book, as in Daoud’s, this separation results in a violent act that casts doubt on the new order.

Harun serves as a bridge between two mutually uncomprehending societies—“that’s the reason why I’ve learned to speak this language [that is, French], and to write it too: so I can speak in the place of a dead man, so I can finish his sentences for him,” he explains at the outset—and herein lies his importance.

In a telling passage, Harun reflects more expansively on the difference between the world of his childhood and what came later, claiming that his mother’s dramatic grief

pushed me to learn a language that could serve as a barrier between her frenzies and me. Yes, the *language*. The one I read, the one I speak today, the one that’s not hers. Hers is rich, full of imagery, vitality, sudden jolts, and improvisations, but not too big on precision. Mama’s grief lasted so long that she needed a new idiom to express it in. In her language, she spoke like a prophetess, recruited extemporaneous mourners, and cried out against the double outrage that consumed her life: a husband swallowed up by air, a son by water. I had to learn a language other than that one. To survive. And it was the one I’m speaking at this moment. . . . Books and your hero’s language gradually enabled me to name things differently and to organize the world with my own words.

More than that, Harun will explain that Meursault’s story was first brought to him by a young woman, a scholar named Meriem, who traced “the Arab’s” origins to Harun and his mother, both of them then living in the village of Hadjout, formerly Marengo. “I was held as if spellbound. At one and the same time, I felt insulted and revealed to myself. . . . It was like reading a book written by God himself.”

The genius and the limitation of Daoud’s novel lie in the directness of this engagement with Meursault/Camus. It’s not hard to grasp why a fiction that so deliberately and so intimately binds itself to Camus’s classic should excite attention and admiration from Western readers. As Nick Fraser wrote in *The Guardian*, Daoud “has created the ultimate Camus mixtape.” Harun expresses equal parts awe and frustration at Meursault/Camus (“a book written by God himself”). Camus’s admirers, then, in identifying with Harun’s admiration, are also more able to understand his dismay.

Daoud, for his part, takes the opportunity to criticize the postcolonial Algeria from which Harun finds himself increasingly alienated. During the first days after liberation, Harun murders a Frenchman (again in a direct echo of Meursault; although the Frenchman is, importantly, granted a name: Joseph Larquais). Harun’s interrogation by the police is as farcical as was Meursault’s. Whereas Meursault was convicted because he didn’t behave like a loving son, Harun is criticized because his timing was off: “This Frenchman, you should have killed him with us, dur-

\*For an excellent commentary on Daoud’s political ideas and his journalism, see “Stranger Still,” Adam Shatz’s profile in *The New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 2015.



ing the war, not last week!” the local colonel explains. Still, Harun says, “At the time when I did that killing, God wasn’t as alive and heavy in this country as he is today.”

Fifty years later, Harun is saddened at the disappearance of women like Meriem (“free, brash, disobedient, aware of their body as a gift, not as a sin or a shame”), and ruefully amused that producing wine—let alone drinking it—is now “considered *haram*, illicit.” Above all, he is profoundly affronted by the dominance of religion in Algeria, horrified by a neighbor who recites from the Koran all night long: “As far as I’m concerned, religion is public transportation I never use,” he quips. “I alone pay the electrical bill, I alone will be eaten by worms in the end. So get lost! And therefore I detest religions and submission.” And further, “I’ll go so far as to say I abhor religions. All of them! Because they falsify the weight of the world.”

As Moaveni observes in the *Financial Times*, “Harun represents the alienation of millions of Arabs struggling to occupy that secular middle ground in their societies, struggling to live among their neighbors in peace and write in safety.” Daoud is giving literary voice, in a language intelligible to the West—both literally, in French, and also within a familiar philosophical tradition—to a point of view that the West longs to hear but that tends to be drowned out by other voices from the Middle East. It’s a perspective that Daoud articulates also in his journalism, putting himself at considerable risk while doing so. One of his newspaper columns from *Le Quotidien d’Oran*, entitled “Meursault,” was translated for the online magazine *Guernica*:

Try to remember the last time there was anything like a national will: twenty years ago. Since then some people have died, others can’t manage to be born, and still others have that faraway look in their eye. In short, we’re all just spectators, like when you see people quarreling in a train station, but you’re worrying about your luggage, your sandwich or your ticket. This feeling is universal with us now: the campaign for reform finally breaks down into an individual struggle to get by. Our country is no longer a project we all share, it’s an obstacle each of us confronts alone.

This insight reverberates in many ways: most simply, it suggests—originally to Algerians themselves, and more broadly to readers outside his country—why Algeria took no more than a small part in the Arab Spring. But it also illuminates the psychological state that keeps the silent millions to whom Moaveni refers from speaking out. It suggests why Harun would need to be half-drunk in a bar in order to confess his thoughts to an outsider. This insight expresses an increasingly widespread state of affairs: in the US as much as in Daoud’s country, we stand by apparently inured to mass

shootings, widespread surveillance, and unchecked police brutality, instead worrying, as it were, about our luggage and our sandwiches.

Daoud is bold to explore, in journalism and in fiction, the true complexity of the Algerian experience as he and others see it. Roger Cohen, in an Op-Ed in *The New York Times*, celebrates the similarities between Daoud and Camus:

There is more that binds their protagonists than separates them—a shared loathing of hypocrisy, shallowness, simplification and falsification. Each, from his different perspective, renders the world visible—the only path to under-

tions are rich and thought-provoking, both for Algerian and for Western readers. He lets no one off the hook, including Harun himself. The claims for the novel’s international importance are, in this sense, well founded. That said, the book cannot be read meaningfully without *The Stranger* behind it: for all its vitality, the novel’s skeleton is Camus’s. Harun’s actions and meditations exist in counterpoint to Meursault’s.

This puts Daoud, ironically, in an irretrievably postcolonial position—always in response, always post facto—that is both philosophically and literarily discomfiting. Yet it enables North American readers as much as French ones to enter, using Camus’s fiction as a filter or funnel for Daoud’s, into a contemporary Algeria otherwise largely inaccessible to outsiders.

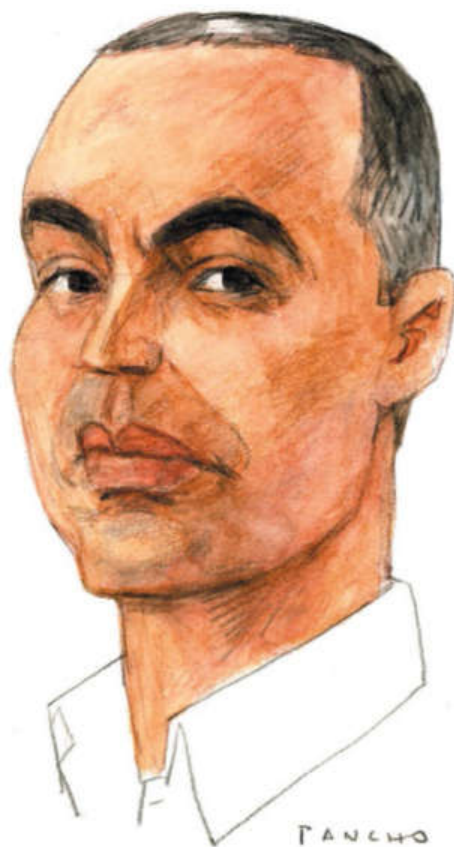
Daoud has cited *The Fall*, rather than *The Stranger*, as his favorite Camus novel, lauding it as “a literary, philosophical, and religious exercise all at once.” In Europe and North America at least, *The Fall* is now much less widely read than most of Camus’s work, and its form—the narrated confession—can seem didactic and often abstract. It has precisely the effect of an exercise, to use Daoud’s word. More than *The Stranger* or *The Plague*, *The Fall* now feels dated. The self-accusing monologues of the former Parisian lawyer who ends up in Amsterdam raise issues that are still germane; its literary form is less convincing. Indeed, one could argue that the force of Camus’s fiction (unlike that of, say, Balzac or Proust or Marguerite Duras) is tied to his philosophical essays; that the sum of his works amounts to more than themselves.

By the same token, *The Meursault Investigation*, fascinating and important as it is, is not of itself an especially interesting work of art. Cleaving as it does to the substance of *The Stranger*, taking *The Fall* as a literary model, it too has the quality of an intellectual exercise—albeit one expertly executed and replete with significance; one that should, even must, be read for its fierce and humane intelligence.

Like Camus before him Daoud is an intellectual, deploying the novel for philosophical and political purposes. His voice and his presence are what many—in Algeria, in Europe, and around the world—have been yearning for. He dares to speak his mind, and is keen to speak in such a way that strangers—in this case, most of his readers—can understand him. In order to assert this freedom, he is prepared to risk his life. As he has said:

The intellectual is the unbending witness to his era, one that leads to liberty or surrender. He’s the voice that carries and proclaims, but also reminds. In the face of the rising totalitarianisms of our new century, it is a question of witnessing on behalf of what is human, on behalf of humanity, but especially on behalf of liberty—its value and necessity.

Kamel Daoud



standing for Arab and Jew, for American and Iranian, for all the world’s “strangers” unseen by each other.

Daoud’s voice is particularly telling for its subtlety and tolerance. He sees Camus more clearly than do many of his enthusiastic European and North American critics, and appreciates the irony that “*The Stranger* is a philosophical novel, but we’re incapable of reading it as anything other than a colonial novel.” Describing his *Meursault* project he says: “I’m not responding to Camus—I’m finding my own path through Camus.”

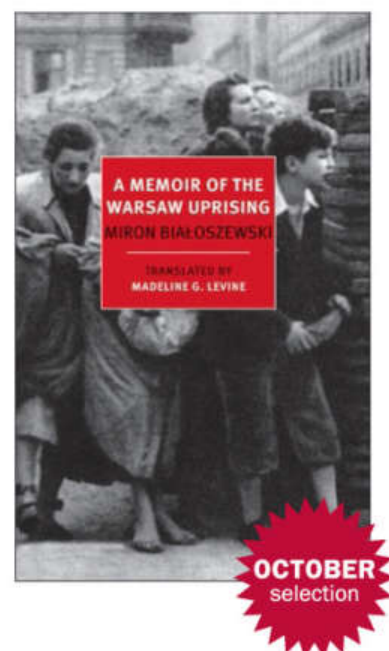
[Camus] was an Algerian writer. My own “Algerianess” is not exclusive and does not exclude others: I assume everything that enriches me, including the monstrous wound of colonization. Camus is Algerian because Algeria is larger and older than French Algeria, Ottoman Algeria, Spanish or Arab Algeria.

Daoud neither rejects Camus and his colonial legacy outright nor accepts his work uncritically. His resulting medita-

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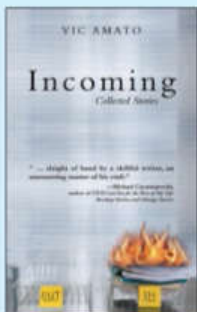


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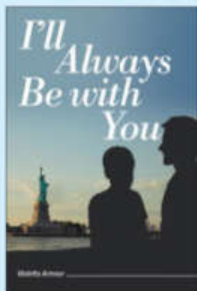
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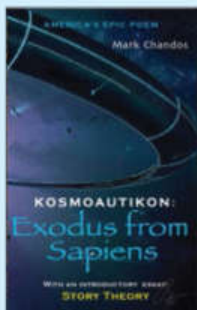
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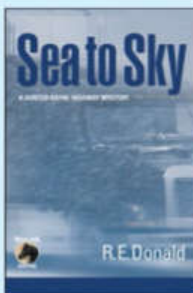
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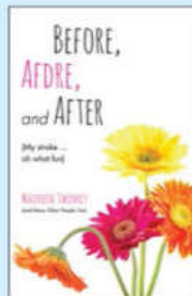
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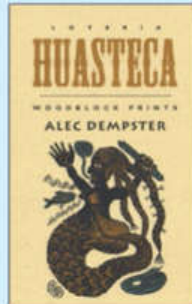
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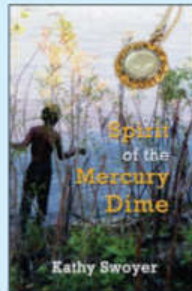
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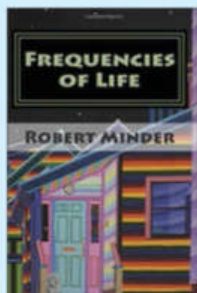
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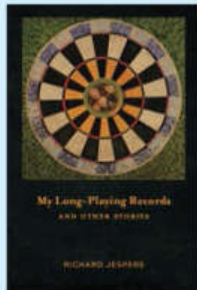
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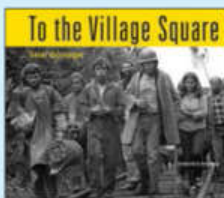
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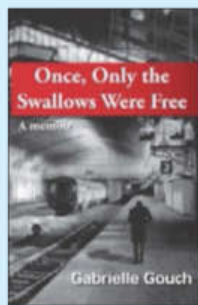
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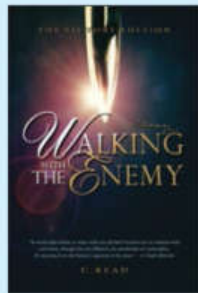
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# The Violent Mysteries of Indonesia

Ian Buruma

## Beauty Is a Wound

by Eka Kurniawan, translated from the Indonesian by Annie Tucker. New Directions, 470 pp., \$19.95 (paper)

## The Act of Killing

a film directed by Joshua Oppenheimer

## The Look of Silence

a film directed by Joshua Oppenheimer

### 1.

Two extraordinary documentary films by Joshua Oppenheimer, shot in Indonesia over a period of ten years, begin with the same terse statement:

In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military. Anybody opposed to the military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist: union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese.

In less than a year, and with the direct aid of Western governments, over one million “communists” were murdered.

The army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power—and have persecuted their opponents—ever since.

One might quibble with the numbers: some say half a million were killed, some say two million, but we will never know precisely; only the Germans kept meticulous records of their blood lust. In some places the army took a direct part in the slaughter, but mostly it left the nastiest jobs to local thugs. Exactly what started the violence is still contested: a failed coup by army factions supported, possibly, by the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), or a power struggle inside the armed forces.

What we know for sure is that Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia, had become a major Asian player in the cold war and his erratic behavior seriously worried Western powers. He saw himself as a revolutionary “president-for-life” who would resist Western imperialism and neocolonialism in league with China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union. This led, in the early 1960s, to a military conflict (“Konfrontasi”) with the newly independent Malaysia, which Sukarno regarded as an anti-revolutionary cat’s paw of British interests. At home, with the Indonesian economy in some chaos, he edged ever closer to the PKI.

The Indonesian armed forces were mostly fiercely opposed to the Communists. It is at least plausible that the initial coup attempt in 1965 was a way for Sukarno and left-wing sympathizers to consolidate his power and control the army. In the early hours of October 1, six generals were murdered. Having been spared this fate, the young and highly conservative Major General Suharto staged a counter-coup just a few hours later. That he was strongly backed, and perhaps actively assisted by the US and Britain, should be no

surprise. Lists of known Communists were allegedly handed over by US officials. Most of them were no doubt killed in the orgy of anti-Communist violence that lasted until early 1966. But many victims were poor peasants who barely knew what communism was. Popular prejudice against Chinese merchants led to ethnic pogroms as well. Suharto became president in the following year, the PKI was banned, and Sukarno lived under house arrest until his death in 1970.

The Indonesian mass murders of 1965 and 1966, hailed in the US news media

wave of writers and artists finally able to challenge the New Order propaganda, sometimes at considerable risk. Former killers still hold positions of power, especially at a local level, and the army is still a political force. Oppenheimer’s many Indonesian collaborators had to remain anonymous in the movie credits.

Eka Kurniawan is one of the young Indonesian fiction writers dealing with the murderous past. History, in his novel *Beauty Is a Wound*, is reimagined as a kind of ghost story, influenced

independence in the late 1940s, and, of course, the bloodbaths of 1965–1966.

Ma Gedik’s vengeful spirit returns to haunt everyone involved in these brutal episodes. But there are other, less visible ghosts too. Dutch visitors to the imaginary Javanese town where the novel is set are warned about “communist ghosts.” The local military commander, whose history bears some resemblance to Suharto’s—trained by the Japanese during the war, fighting the Dutch after the war, a killer of Communists in 1965—is tormented by ghosts:

For years after the massacre he experienced terrible insomnia, and then when he did finally fall asleep, he suffered from sleepwalking. Communist ghosts were out to get him all the time....

In the end, Ma Gedik’s ghost is finished off by Dewi Ayu, daughter of Ma Iyang and the Dutchman who raped her. In order to perform this last act of killing, she too comes back from the dead as a ghost. Ma Gedik’s last words to her are: “You may have succeeded in killing me, but my curse will live on.” These words are echoed at the end of the book by one of Dewi Ayu’s daughters, lamenting the years of rape and murder. “We are like a cursed family,” one of them sobs. “We are not *like* a cursed family,” her sister says, “we are truly and completely cursed.”

The family, it is strongly implied, is Indonesia, a country as beautiful, and as much abused, as the “Indo” children and grandchildren of the Dutchman and his native concubine. It is a bleak but fitting response to many years of covering up the horrors of a blood-soaked past. *Beauty Is a Wound* is not a perfect novel. The rather awkward translation makes it difficult to judge the quality of Kurniawan’s prose style: crude slang words are embedded in clumsy sentences. But despite the postmodern literary grandstanding, he manages to bring history to life without burdening his text with heavy-handed political messages. The sources of violence, in his novel, run deeper than politics. Politics are an excuse for unleashing man’s worst instincts. At his best, Kurniawan finds the perfect mix of metaphor and realism.

Maman Gendeng is the boss of the local gangsters, or *preman*, a word that is said to be derived from “free man.” Convinced that his daughter was raped by a dog, Maman Gendeng decides to kill all the dogs in town:

His thugs began to spread out in large groups, carrying their deadly weapons. A number of them carried pellet guns, others had machetes and unsheathed swords....

And so the most horrifying dog massacre began, almost like the massacre of communists that had taken place eighteen years before.... The thugs easily slashed open the dogs that were roaming in the streets, hacking them to pieces as if they were going to turn them into satay meat....

He was indeed truly furious at everyone in the city, except for his



Rohani, an Indonesian woman whose oldest son, Ramli, was killed as a suspected Communist in the mass murders of 1965–1966, in Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary film *The Look of Silence*

at the time as a great victory over communism, must rank among the worst atrocities of the last century. Under Suharto’s New Order regime, they were effectively buried under a blanket of enforced silence. Worse than silence, actually: Indonesians were taught, in textbooks, movies, monuments, and so forth, that the killers were heroes who had saved the nation from a great evil. Many of the “heroes” of this official story were rewarded with power and money. One former death squad leader interviewed by Oppenheimer in his second film, *The Look of Silence*, even felt a little peeved that the US government had never bothered to give him any prize—like a family cruise to America, for example. Families of the victims had to survive as best they could and stay mute.

But truth cannot be suppressed forever—not in France, where the official veil of discretion was lifted off the Vichy past, not in Spain or Argentina, and not in Indonesia. Different narratives began to emerge after 1998, when Suharto was ousted after a spate of riots (once again, Chinese were often the victims of violence). Political journals, such as *Tempo*, ran articles about the 1965 massacres. In 2012, the National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia published a detailed report on the murders, only to be dismissed by the attorney general, a figure of the old regime.<sup>1</sup> Oppenheimer, who has made two documentaries on the subject, is part of a new

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Margaret Scott, an American expert on Indonesia, for much of this information. Additional footnotes appear in the Web version of this review at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).



cronies, but his daughter was also sort of like an excuse. He had in fact held a grudge against the people for quite a long time, knowing for sure that they all looked down on him and his friends as unemployed goons who passed their time doing nothing but drinking beer and fighting.

## 2.

Oppenheimer's first film, *The Act of Killing*, is precisely about such goons, and the ghosts that haunt at least some of them. He not only managed to get a number of *preman*, members of the paramilitary Pancasila Youth, former death squad leaders, and others who took part or were complicit in the massacres of 1965 to talk; he did something more interesting, and controversial: he asked them to reenact their atrocities in a kind of film inside a film. They are the directors of their own fantasies and nightmares. It is a most disturbing exercise, for we get a direct view into the minds of mass murderers.

What makes these performances even more unnerving is the part of the victims. Sometimes, they are played by the killers themselves, switching roles. In one horrible instance, the torture victim is acted out by the stepson of a man who really was murdered in 1965. He tells the story of his stepfather with an eerie giggle, to hide his discomfort. Under mock torture, he begins to drool with fear, begging for his life; he becomes his stepfather. In another brutal reenactment for the cameras, a village is raided, with actual villagers playing the victims of rape and cutthroat killings. Children can't stop weeping once the filming is over. One woman is so distressed that she almost faints.

Oppenheimer has been accused of being prurient, an exploiter, of taking the stories of homicidal thugs at face value. But this is to misunderstand what he was up to. The exact truth of what happened in 1965, and the politics behind the massacres, are not the points of his investigation. Instead, he is interested in how former killers manage to live with their past, and how their braggadocio, backed by government propaganda, has shaped Indonesian society since.

The main reason he was able to get these men to reenact their crimes is that they had never been treated as criminals. Officially, even the worst perpetrators among them were hailed as heroes. Oppenheimer has stated in interviews that coming to Sumatra, where both of his films were shot, was as if he had "wandered into Germany 40 years after the Holocaust, only to find the Nazis still in power."<sup>2</sup> With this difference, however: Oppenheimer, whose own relatives were killed in the Holocaust, would hardly have been trusted by Nazis. The Indonesian killers trusted him because he was an American, and America, as one of them says in Oppenheimer's second movie, had taught them to hate Communists.

Some of the murderers and their accomplices are wealthy businessmen or politicians. One is a newspaper editor, in whose office people were tortured and killed. Others are petty criminals,

still shaking down terrified Chinese shopkeepers in the Medan marketplace. Their grotesque performances for Oppenheimer's camera of torture, rape, and murder might seem ghoulish, a form of pornographic sadism. The "actors" are almost childishly eager to show exactly how they strangled their victims with wire or cut their throats.

In some ways, the reenactments are a form of pornography, with the actors taking pleasure in their own recollections. One of the most chilling statements comes from a brutal-looking character reminiscing about raping young girls with impunity. It was "hell for them," he recalls, "but heaven for me." And yet the scenes of simulated cruelty have a serious purpose. They tell us more than we might like to know about common human behavior.



A musical reenactment scene from *The Act of Killing*

One thing seems clear, if anyone needs to be reminded of this: collective violence is rarely spontaneous, or the result of deep feelings of hate among ordinary people. That is what the men who give the orders would like us to think. A former commander claims precisely that in Oppenheimer's film. But it is an evasion of his own responsibility. One of the perpetrators admits that the "Communists" were not all bad people. Indeed, says another, the killers may have been crueler than their victims. There follows an earnest discussion about the difference between cruelty and sadism. The men agree that what they did was cruel, perhaps, but not sadistic.

Most of the killers have only a very hazy idea of what a Communist is supposed to be: "They don't believe in God" is one common explanation. "They sleep with each others' wives" is another. The main thing is that the murderers were given official license to do anything they liked to human beings who were designated as "bad people," unworthy of life. It was permissible, even righteous, to burn down their houses, steal their goods, rape the women, and kill them all.

Not everyone will take part in such savagery, but many people will. How one lives with it afterward is the question. The answer depends to a large degree on the capacity to put oneself in the place of the victims. *The Act of Killing* is really a documentary film about the human imagination. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt was wrong about Eichmann; he was a fanatic, not an unthinking bureaucrat. But I believe she was right to link moral collapse to what she called a "criminal lack of imagination." This has very little to do with cultural refinement or education.

The most interesting figure in *The Act of Killing* is a mobster named Anwar Congo. A dark-skinned dandy in dapper suits mimicking the heroes of his favorite Hollywood gangster movies, Anwar is not an educated man. In the early 1960s, he was a young punk who made his money scalping tickets at a local cinema. His main gripe with the "Communists" was their attempt to boycott American films.

The influence of the movies can be seen in all the cinematic reenactments of Anwar's torture scenes, when he menaces his victims with the mannerisms of a deeply malevolent Hollywood gangster. His reimagined killings take place in the lurid lighting of a film noir. Weirdly, on a TV talk show, Anwar mentions Sidney Poitier as his favorite movie star. But his models are closer to

Charles Bronson or Lee Marvin. The license to kill in 1965 allowed Anwar and thousands of others like him to think of themselves as movie heroes, and no longer as goons in a dusty Indonesian backwater.

The *preman* killers recall drinking the blood of their victims to stop themselves from going insane. Anwar, for one, is still pursued by the ghosts of his victims in frequent nightmares. This, too, is part of the film within a film, with Anwar's nightly tormentors dressed up as horror film characters. What this suggests is that concealed behind the swagger—he dances the cha-cha on the spot where he tortured his victims to death—there lurks a guilty conscience. Oppenheimer has said in interviews that he regards this as usual among former killers. I'm less sure of this. Anwar may be rather exceptional.

Adi Zulkadry was one of Anwar's fellow murderers. Adi is better educated, a rich businessman in Jakarta now, who takes his miniskirted daughter shopping in luxurious shopping malls. When he returns to his old killing haunts to help in the reenactments, he seems almost embarrassed to be associated with his old gangster cronies. But he tells Oppenheimer over and over that he never loses any sleep. There is no reason to feel guilty, he says. Right and wrong, after all, are relative concepts: Did the Americans not feel justified in what they did in Iraq? "We were allowed to do it," he argues, "and the proof is we murdered people and were never punished."

Oppenheimer is very good at holding the camera in close-ups, registering the nervous twitches, the sudden wincing of embarrassment, quickly covered up by yet another evasion of the truth. Adi's face betrays nothing. He is like a slab

of stone, gazing into space as his daughter is being pampered in a beauty salon. We cannot really know what another person is thinking or feeling, but it looks as though Adi feels nothing at all.

The same isn't true of Anwar. His grisly performances end in an extraordinary denouement. In a particularly harrowing scene, he plays his own victim being tortured by his old self. Reviewing the scene many times at home on a monitor, he insists that his young grandsons watch his torment with him, as though playing the victim could somehow redeem him. Isn't it sad, he says, to see grandpa being beaten up. The children squirm. But Anwar considers out loud what the victims must have felt, how they lost every shred of human dignity. Soon after, back on the actual torture scene, we see him convulsing in a fit of retching. Anwar may have been a killer, but he has the imagination to see the horror of his own behavior.

The problem with *The Act of Killing* is a bit like that of the Auschwitz Trials, held in Frankfurt from 1963 to 1965. The Hessian state attorney general Fritz Bauer wanted to hold up the trial as a mirror to all Germans. Punishing the brutes who did the dirty work at Auschwitz was only the beginning; making all Germans take moral responsibility was the more important aim. Alas, however, the lurid stories in the German press about monstrous deeds committed by devilish men made it far too easy for "decent" people to maintain their comforting distance. Bauer considered the trials a failure.<sup>3</sup>

Like Bauer, Oppenheimer meant his films to be an indictment not just of individual killers, but of a corrupted society built on violence and death. In his words, "everybody is somehow a collaborator," not just in Indonesia, but in countries that encouraged and abetted the massacres too.<sup>4</sup> He has pointed out that his fellow Americans live in a country whose former vice-president continues to praise torturers as patriotic heroes. We are closer to the killers than we would wish.

But Oppenheimer's intention is somewhat undermined in *The Act of Killing* by the grotesque parade of killers on show, one of them in full drag, most of them absurd in their theatrical poses. It is of course true that the orders to kill were usually given by more conventional men, in or out of uniform. We see one of these in the film, the deputy minister of sports, a bland-looking fellow watching members of the paramilitary Pancasila Youth pretending to burn and rape and kill their way through an imaginary village, screaming from the blood of their victims. After the screaming is over, he sheepishly tells Oppenheimer that he wouldn't want people to get the wrong impression. His men are not savages: "We must exterminate the Communists, but in a humane way."

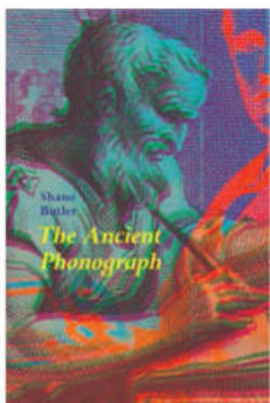
Oppenheimer's second film, *The Look of Silence*, is a quieter, less flamboyant

<sup>3</sup>A recent movie, *Labyrinth of Lies*, directed by Giulio Ricciarelli, accurately dramatizes the atmosphere in Germany during the Frankfurt trials.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Jess Melvin, *Inside Indonesia*, April–June 2013.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, his interview with Adam Shatz in *The New York Times Magazine*, July 9, 2015.





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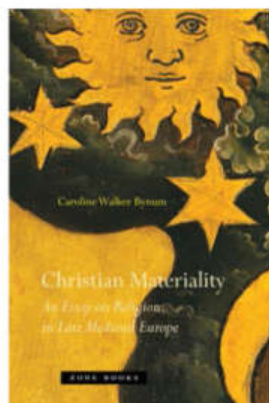
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work and all the stronger for it. The focus is on one family, whose eldest son, Ramli, was hacked to death as a suspected Communist. His mutilated body, like that of many others, was dumped in the Snake River, not far from Medan in Sumatra. Ramli's father was devastated by the killing; he lost his teeth, then his eyesight, and most of his hearing. Ramli's mother still fumes in silence, telling herself that the killers will surely be punished in the afterlife.

The main figure in the film is the second son, Adi, born two years after his brother's murder. Adi is an ophthalmologist, which fits the story so perfectly that he could almost be the protagonist in a novel: he does everything in his power to see things more clearly, and coax others into seeing things more clearly, including some of his brother's killers, whom he interrogates even as he is screwing on lenses to measure their eyesight.

Part of the drama in Oppenheimer's documentary technique lies in the way he shows his subjects watching themselves on film. This is what helped to spark Anwar Congo's imagination. We watch Adi as he gazes, not so much in disbelief as in horrified fascination, at images of his brother's murderers cheerfully reenacting their hideous deed. After he was stabbed in the back with a machete, Ramli's stomach was slashed. He managed somehow to crawl back home, but the killers picked him up again the next morning, shoved the severely wounded man onto a truck, and dragged him by the feet to the Snake River, where they cut his throat and sliced off his genitals.

Adi's aim in talking to the men involved in this ghastly murder is not to offend or wreak vengeance. His hope is more noble, and heartbreaking. What he wants is at least a glimmer of remorse, as though a sign of regret might relieve his despair about humanity. But instead of remorse, he is met with angry excuses, even threats. What would have happened, he asks

a former death squad leader, if he had approached him in this manner during the Suharto years? "You can't imagine what would have happened to you," the man snarls.

Unlike many of the killers in the first movie, however, most of the perpetrators in *The Look of Silence* look like perfectly ordinary middle-aged men, polite, helpful, even friendly. A kindly former village schoolteacher, Amir Hasan, is happy to show Oppenheimer a comic book, entitled *Dew of Blood*, with his own graphic drawings of the horrors he committed. Among the pictures is an illustration of ghosts rising from a well where the dead bodies were dumped. Another illustration shows just what Amir and a friend named Inong did to Ramli, on the edge of the Snake River. Amir is not at all remorseful. He is proud.

Even Adi's own uncle, a thin, quiet-spoken man, turns out to have been an accomplice. He was one of the guards at the political prison where his nephew was held before being dragged off to his death. The uncle's excuses echo the words of countless ordinary men all over the world whose hands are soaked in blood: he just followed orders, he had no choice, he wasn't responsible, he never saw any killings, what happened happened, there is no point in opening old wounds, and so on and on.

Adi keeps staring, at the brutal kitsch in the comic book, at Amir and Inong acting out how they cut off Ramli's genitals with a machete, at the men mouthing their threats, lies, and lame excuses, and is numbed into a state of intense sadness. Meanwhile, his brother's killers, ever cooperative, go through the motions of Ramli's death over and over, making sure every detail is registered on film, meticulous historians of their own crimes. Once the filming is done, they pose for a photograph on the edge of the Snake River, right on the spot where Ramli was cut to pieces, and they smile for the camera giving the thumbs-up sign, chilling in its banality, and horribly familiar. □

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doctor not of medicine,  
but Latinity.

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do you take me for?  
*If* is a real condition.  
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you are double blind.  
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it's all in your head,  
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# A Conspiratorial Theory of the Renaissance

Walter Kaiser



Bridgeman Images

Benozzo Gozzoli: The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem; detail of the fresco on the east wall of the chapel of the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence, circa 1460

## Must We Divide History into Periods?

by Jacques Le Goff, translated from the French by M. B. DeBevoise. Columbia University Press, 160 pp., \$30.00

## The Ugly Renaissance: Sex, Greed, Violence and Depravity in an Age of Beauty

by Alexander Lee. Doubleday, 433 pp., \$30.00

### 1.

Shortly before his death last year, the eminent French medievalist Jacques Le Goff published a small book that may be considered his scholarly testament and that has now been translated into English by Malcolm DeBevoise with the title *Must We Divide History into Periods?* The answer Le Goff ultimately gives to his question is yes, claiming that periodization makes “the study of history both feasible and rewarding”; but the main point of his argument is to redefine the commonly accepted historical period known as the Renaissance. His central thesis, which is a summary restatement of ideas he had expounded in earlier studies, is that the “Middle Ages,” frequently defined as the period from the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the fourth century to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, in fact lasted until at least the middle of the eighteenth century.

Le Goff was a leading member of the influential Annales school of his-

tory, named after the scholarly journal founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929, which emphasized social, economic, geographic, and long-term trends rather than political, military, or diplomatic history. Although he never knew him personally, Le Goff’s intellectual inspiration was Bloch, murdered by the Nazis in 1944 because of his part in the French resistance and famous for his innovative work on “magic-working kings” in France and on agrarian history in the eighteenth century.

The Annales school put great emphasis on what it called the *longue durée*, an extended period of time measured in geographical and socioeconomic terms. One of the school’s finest achievements is the monumental study by Fernand Braudel (who coined the phrase *longue durée*) of the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II of Spain, a panoramic view of life on the sea but also in the desert and mountains over two or three centuries, which emphasizes not specific events or people but vast social, economic, climatic, and geographical trends, and such timeless activities as transhumance, the movements of sheep from lowland to highland and back as the seasons change. It is one of the great works of twentieth-century historiography, conceived and outlined, amazingly, while Braudel was a prisoner of war in Lübeck, Germany; in the early 1940s.

In discussing different aspects of organizing—and understanding—historical time, Le Goff begins with a discussion of early attempts at periodization found in the Book of Daniel

and the work of Saint Augustine. Both ways of looking at time, one based on the four seasons, the other on the six days of creation, pessimistically implied that the world was growing old, although Augustine held out the possibility of some sort of renewal based on “the prospect of redemption with regard to the past and of hope with regard to the future.”

It was not until the fourteenth century that the concept of the Middle Ages (*media aetas*)—the period of roughly the preceding one thousand years—was developed by writers who felt they were at the beginning of a new, better epoch. The great Italian poet and humanist Petrarch (1304–1374) was the first to delineate the period that preceded him as benighted, claiming that he stood in a new dawn that heralded a return to the humanistic values of Greek and Latin antiquity in contrast to the preceding period of oppressive scholasticism and religion.

Le Goff wishes to emphasize what he calls “a long Middle Ages,” lasting from the fall of the Western Roman Empire until the French Revolution in the eighteenth century. Employing the perspective of the *longue durée*, he writes:

Important as the Renaissance undoubtedly was, and however reasonable it may seem to mark it off as a discrete segment of historical time, I do not believe that the Renaissance can truly be said to constitute a separate period. It seems

to me instead to constitute the last renaissance of a long Middle Ages.

His most succinct defense of his position is found in a six-page essay in an earlier collection of his writings, *L’Imaginaire médiéval* (1985), which has been handsomely translated by Arthur Goldhammer in *The Medieval Imagination* (1988) as “For an Extended Middle Ages.” There he claims:

I have no intention of reviving the interminable quarrel over the Renaissance versus the Middle Ages. I ask only that the Renaissance be seen in proper proportion, as a brilliant but superficial interlude.

Emphasizing enduring continuities, Le Goff argues that “certain fundamental structures persisted in European society from the fourth to the nineteenth century, bestowing a coherent character on a period of some fifteen centuries.” He emphasizes that such periods “are typically long and typically marked by phases of significant, though not epochal, change. In the case of the Middle Ages these subperiods are usefully called *renaissances*.” To illustrate what he means, he cites a formidable range of institutions, conditions, and attitudes that, despite the fact that they may have altered somewhat over time, remained essentially the same throughout this prolonged period. One example is the fact that most people remained Christian, even though there were significant changes in theology, including the Protestant Reformation; another is the prolonged dominance of an agrarian economy despite developing commercialism. Le Goff also points out that

between antiquity and the time when modernity was fully embraced (the middle of the nineteenth century) renaissance was a recurrent phenomenon: the Carolingian renaissance in the eighth and ninth centuries, the renaissance of the twelfth century, the “great” Renaissance that began in Italy in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries... and the renaissance of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in art, literature, and theology.

In the midst of his defense of a long Middle Ages in *Must We Divide History into Periods?*, Le Goff pauses briefly to consider the implications of 1492, considered by many as a beginning of the Renaissance, and of Columbus, who he insists was “very much a man of the Middle Ages,” because he was “motivated primarily by a desire to lead the pagans [to]... the God of the Christians.” He poses a basic question: “The question for the historian, then, becomes this: in the enlargement brought about in 1492, which is more important, that which ends or that which continues?” But should we not add a third possibility: that which begins?

The period we are accustomed to call the Renaissance included, in addition to Columbus’s discovery of America, Copernicus’s discovery of heliocentricity,



Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe, Harvey's discovery of the systemic circulation of the blood, Gutenberg's discovery of printing, the rediscovery of Greek, the rise of the nation-state and the gradual decline of feudalism, the arrival of vast quantities of gold and silver from the New World and the creation of an industrial monetary economy, a new appreciation of nature, the introduction of portraits, landscapes, linear perspective, and easel painting in art, and the Protestant Reformation. These are only a few of the best-known discoveries and innovations of the period.

To look at the Renaissance from another angle, there are the discernible, definable differences in feudal chivalry between the *Chanson de Roland* and *Orlando Furioso* or in the concept of autobiography between Saint Augustine and Benvenuto Cellini or Montaigne. Such examples attest to fundamentally altered ways of thinking.

Choosing to emphasize the similarities shared by the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries with earlier epochs or the differences between them is a bit like trying to decide whether a glass is half-empty or half-full. It depends on one's perspective, one's inclinations, and the argument one wishes to make. Le Goff's view of a long Middle Ages is a valuable corrective to exaggerated claims for the revolutionary newness of the European Renaissance. It is salutary to be reminded that despite all the innovations in thought and art, religion and economics, the daily life of many people remained essentially medieval, that plagues and famine continued, that monarchy persisted as the dominant political reality, that a rural economy prevailed, that most people, whether Catholic or Protestant, were Christians,<sup>1</sup> and that white bread remained a comparative rarity until the eighteenth century. Le Goff's capacious learning and sophisticated analysis of the alterations and continuities during the *longue durée* of his Middle Ages are richly informative and thought-provoking, even if one believes the Renaissance was more distinctive than he does.

## 2.

Alexander Lee's new history of the Italian Renaissance also wishes to revise our view of it, but in quite different respects. He is concerned to refute what he repeatedly calls "familiar preconceptions" of the Renaissance as a "pure, ideal world." He seems to think that most people believe the great men of the Renaissance—the artists, writers, statesmen, humanists, and condottieri—were ideal human beings, embodiments of perfection, who lived in a golden world of unsullied beauty and unstained virtue. At pains to disabuse us of such a utopian vision, he depicts a Renaissance of "sex, greed, violence and depravity." Despite his extensive reading in primary and secondary sources, which should have given him a more nuanced view of human nature, Lee's portrait of this

period is suffused with a surprising amount of Manichaean dualism. Good and bad, like white and black, are polar opposites that combine to form at least fifty shades of gray in his lurid account of the seamy underside of the Italian Renaissance.

At the outset of his study, in what he calls his "snapshot of the young Michelangelo," he gives symbolic significance to the story recounted by both Cellini and Vasari of how the teenage boy got into an argument and fight with his pal Pietro Torrigiano, who broke his nose in the scuffle. Lee claims, with some anatomical confusion, that Michelangelo's broken nose reveals his "feet of clay." What he means by that is that the great artist was not the perfect man we might suppose; instead, he was "proud, touchy, scornful, and sharp-tongued," failed to bathe or comb his hair, and was bisexual:

As arrogant as he was talented, he was a dirty, disorganized, and tormented individual who was as easily embroiled in fights as he was bound to the will of popes, and as susceptible to Neoplatonic homoeroticism as he was to the reassurances of the Church and the blandishments of a cultured and elegant lady.

In short, the creator of the *David* and the Sistine ceiling was, we are informed, an imperfect human being, and his famous broken nose is a symbol of the fact that Renaissance men and women, however noble their achievements, were also often nasty, venal, cruel, sex-obsessed people—contrary to what we are assumed to have supposed.

Almost no one escapes Lee's conspiratorial theory of history, which is repeatedly signaled by his recurrent use of the ominous verb "lurk." The Renaissance papacy, notorious in its day, is an easy target for his opprobrium: Alexander VI "slept with virtually anything that moved," Leo X and Julius II had "a particular taste for young boys," and Sixtus IV was reputed to have given his cardinals special dispensation "to commit sodomy during the summer months."

The Renaissance papacy generally was "dark, devious, and utterly corrupt" and used the fine arts "to mask or to celebrate its darkest and ugliest face." He laments that the magnificent art commissioned by the papacy, like Raphael's *School of Athens*, decorated walls that "looked down on men who willingly devoted themselves to wild sex and debauchery." Only with Pius II does Lee have difficulty finding any shocking vices except for nepotism, and hence he is obliged to resort to the supposition that "while there is no direct evidence... it [is] hard to believe he did not sneak the odd bribe to well-placed individuals to improve his chances of acceding to the papal throne."

If the papacy used great art to conceal its devious sins, so did secular men of eminence. Federico da Montefeltro, who created the court at Urbino immortalized by Castiglione in *The Book of the Courtier*, is described as "among the most underhanded, backstabbing men of the age"; Sigismondo Malatesta, who commissioned the imposing Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini created by Leon Battista Alberti and decorated by Piero della Francesca and Agostino di Duccio (and who his

contemporaries knew was a monster), is condemned as vicious, treacherous, and sadomasochistic. All rich bankers are accused of commissioning works of art and architecture out of "the desperation with which they clamored to save their blackened souls through art." "Every brick, every brushstroke, testified to the usury, extortion, and downright dirtiness that was essential to every fortune made."

Perhaps the figure whose reputation suffers most at Lee's hands is Cosimo de' Medici, beloved by his contemporaries, venerated by the humanist writers of his day,<sup>2</sup> and honored with the unique title *Pater Patriae* (Father of



Federico da Montefeltro; portrait by Piero della Francesca, circa 1465

His City) by the city of Florence upon his death. He is thought by Lee to be "among the most ghastly people of the entire period."

An extended central section of Lee's book is focused on Benozzo Gozzoli's well-known frescoes in the tiny chapel of Palazzo Medici Riccardi, commissioned by Cosimo, depicting *The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem*, which Lee, like every informed viewer, recognizes as a form of propaganda for the Medici family; for once one realizes that most of the figures are portraits of known quattrocento personages, it is impossible to regard them in any other light (see the painting on page 63). Lee recounts how, when young Galeazzo Maria Sforza, the future Duke of Milan, arrived in Florence on April 17, 1459, he went to call on Cosimo de' Medici in his palace, and he conjectures that Cosimo "may well have" received Galeazzo in the intimacy of his private chapel rather than in one of the grand public rooms in order to impress him with "the rich, exuberant frescoes." In the ensuing forty or more pages, he repeatedly returns to this imagined moment to explain what the purpose of the frescoes was, how they demonstrate not only the wealth,

power, and greatness of the family but also Cosimo's guilt over what a "moneygrubbing, power-hungry megalomaniac" he was, and how the paintings were "designed to cover up" his Mafia-like vices.

Lee also recurrently imagines what fifteen-year-old Galeazzo would have felt as he gazed on the fresco's portraits of Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo de' Medici, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini who became Pope Pius II, Marsilio Ficino, the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaiologos, Sigismondo Malatesta, and other notable figures of the time. Somehow he fails to mention what Galeazzo might have thought on seeing himself also depicted there, riding beside Malatesta.

It's curious that Lee should describe Galeazzo's visit to the Medici chapel as a matter of conjecture, when we possess the letter Galeazzo sent to his parents describing the day he arrived in Florence, copies of which are in Milan and Mantua, in which he explicitly says that Cosimo received him in his chapel ("*Visitay el magnifico Cosmo, quale atrovay in una sua capella*"). But it is even stranger that Lee should spend so much time telling us how Cosimo wanted to impress Galeazzo with the frescoes and what Galeazzo learned from them, since in fact Galeazzo could not possibly have seen what didn't exist: Benozzo Gozzoli did not actually begin painting *The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem* until some time after Galeazzo had departed Florence on May 3, 1459.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his fervent descriptions of Renaissance depravity and crime, Lee deplores a "familiar tendency to divorce literary and artistic production from more 'human' concerns," claiming that the "real" world of the Renaissance was

born not of the purely aesthetic concerns of otherworldly beings removed from the joys and sorrows of ordinary people, but among unrequited passions, broken hearts, sexual obsessions, and suffering.

As an example, he wants us to know that

however chaste Michelangelo may have been while he was carving the *David*, it is inconceivable that his sexual attitudes were not at least touched by the sheer number of prostitutes whom he would have encountered while walking through the streets of Florence.

For all its learning and research, Lee's account of the Italian Renaissance is based on a relentlessly repeated postulate—what Shakespeare called a stalking horse—that the "familiar conceptions of the 'Renaissance'" have misled almost everyone into thinking it was an age of perfect beauty and flawless achievement, shining virtue and unbesmirched probity. I myself have never known anyone who believed that, and one has to wonder if Lee really ever has either. □

<sup>2</sup>See Alison Brown, "The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo de' Medici, Pater Patriae," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 24, Nos. 3–4 (July–December 1961), unmentioned in Lee's bibliography. For a detailed, dispassionate description of Cosimo's career, see John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575* (Blackwell, 2006), pp. 250–306.

<sup>3</sup>On this, see Rab Hatfield, "Some Unknown Descriptions of the Medici Palace in 1459," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (September 1970), and Diane Cole Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli* (Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 81ff., neither of which is listed in Lee's bibliography.



# The Real India

Anita Desai

## The Lives of Others

by Neel Mukherjee.

Norton, 516 pp., \$26.95; \$15.95 (paper)

Such is the power of the image of Mahatma Gandhi as a saint of iconolatry, emaciated, half-naked, bent over a walking stick as he leads India's masses to freedom from imperial power without ever raising a gun or a hand or even his voice, that the impression of India's freedom movement having been a pacifist, nonviolent one is almost ineradicable. It is of course far from the truth. There was always a violent strain in that history as well, less unified, more contested.

Exactly a century ago Rabindranath Tagore wrote of the struggle between the two forms of revolution. In his 1915 novel *The Home and the World*, he has the noble and altruistic aristocrat Nikhil represent one camp (clearly the one he himself felt the most acceptable), and Sandip, the villainous revolutionary who stops at nothing, the other. Torn between the two is Nikhil's wife, Bimala, who is portrayed as if she was Mother India herself, or the goddess Durga, beloved of Bengal (and of course Durga has a ferocious, blood-thirsty aspect as well, that of Kali).

Now a hundred years later, another Bengali writer, Neel Mukherjee, has addressed the same conflict in his novel *The Lives of Others*. Unlike Tagore's novel, it is written in English, not Bengali, but an English not filtered through an English perspective or English sensibility and as profoundly indigenous in its tone, environment, characters, speech, and actions as is Tagore's novel. Mukherjee makes few concessions to the foreign reader other than providing a map, a family tree, a note on names and relations (which are at least as complex as those in Russian literature), and a wonderfully informative and witty glossary that one can peruse with pleasure. One has the sense, in reading the book, of being in the presence of the real thing. In fact, the reader could be daunted by so much reality.

In the prologue, we see a peasant starving to death; his family has not eaten for days. When he goes to the landlord to beg for a cup of rice, he is ejected by guards who joke, "Where are you going to hit this dog? He is nothing but bones, we don't even have to hit him. Blow on him and he'll fall back." Somehow Nitai Das gathers the strength to return home where he picks up his sickle and "with his practised farmer's hand" beheads first his wife, then his children, and finally drinks from a jerrycan of pesticide and is "returned from the nothing in his life to nothing." So, in the first three pages, Mukherjee establishes himself as a writer who will spare the reader nothing. Why should he? he seems to ask, this is how things are. Look.

He then opens up the scene to portray three generations of the well-fed, well-to-do Ghosh family of Calcutta by peeling aside the façade of their substantial house on Basanta Bose Road so we may observe them as if they were

bees in a hive, ants in a hill. The technique may seem Victorian and, as in a Victorian novel, the accumulation of detail provides a texture that is dense and richly satisfying.

Like a pair of deities, the patriarch Prafullanath and his consort Charubala occupy the top floor. It is he who has lifted himself and his family to such heights by clever, if unscrupulous, deals in property and by acquiring and running, ruthlessly, a string of paper mills, Charu Paper & Sons (Pvt. Ltd), across Bengal.

The eldest son, Adinath, lives on the floor below with his pious wife Sandhya



A shrine to the Hindu goddess Kali on the banks of the Ganges River, Calcutta, 1987; photograph by Raghu Rai

and is expected to carry on the family business—although as a young man he had yearned to be an engineer—and it is clear he will inherit the greater share of the family wealth. Priyonath, the second son, works harder and earns less—or so his congenitally jealous wife Purnima is convinced.

The third son, Bholanath, not considered fit for business, supposedly runs a publishing division called Charu Books, but he spends his time among a coterie of aspiring writers like himself. The youngest son, Somnath, a wastrel and a debauchee, becomes the neighborhood scandal. There is also a daughter, Chhaya, who failed to marry on account of her dark complexion and the squint in her eye: "her very name, which meant 'shadow,' was a backhanded acknowledgment by her parents of the undeniable."

Then there is an assortment of grandchildren: Adinath's two sons, Priyonath's spoiled daughter, who is sent to an "English school" at great expense, Bholanath's less indulged daughter Arunima, and Somnath's two, the most unfortunate and ill-treated ones—all sharply aware of their place in the family hierarchy and never allowed to forget it. And of course the full contingent of servants without whom such a household could not be run. This lava bed of rivalries and jealousies seethes and simmers under the solid rock of what is known, in legal terms, as the "Hindu joint family."

The scene could be claustrophobic but it is not because, although set chiefly in the 1960s and 1970s, there are chapters going back to World War

II, the Japanese air raids on Calcutta, the great famine of 1942 and 1943, and the partition of India after Independence in 1947. The history of the Ghosh family is woven through these events. Mukherjee, one sees, is a writer of huge ambition who possesses the authority to handle that history.

He also has the miniaturist's eye for detail; he overlooks nothing, not "a tired cushion" or a glass-fronted book cupboard that houses the collected works of Tagore in "a uniform brown-spined army" that conceals a bottle of Johnnie Walker, or "the fawn-coloured lizard edging closer and closer, with

riddance I say. They can leave for wherever they want, as long as they leave us Calcutta." During the great famine when starving peasants flood into the city and are seen dying in the streets outside their door, he asserts:

"People like us don't die of starvation." . . . Really, death from hunger was such a remote possibility in their lives—no, impossible. It was not their situation, never would be; they were not in any danger; it was only a changeable backdrop to the drama of their lives.

When Independence is declared in 1947, the family stays up to listen to Nehru's speech on the radio: "*At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake . . .*" Charubala growls, "Ufff, why they decide to do all this so late at night, don't these people need to sleep?"

But now the insulated world of the family is showing its cracks; the volcano will not be silent for much longer. The business is so deeply in debt to the banks that Charubala is compelled to perform the symbolic act of giving up a part of her treasure chest—the gold jewelry that personifies the honor of a Bengali family. This is the ultimate shame and her sons' "burning faces felt too heavy to lift up to look at their mother, or at each other."

There are private acts of shame that cannot even be acknowledged. Priyonath furtively visits a brothel where he pays a prostitute to perform an act even the madam will not tolerate: "We're seeing all this gentull-man stuff on the outside-outside and low dog on the inside-inside," she screams, and has the bouncer beat him up so badly he fears having to explain his state to his family. Chhaya performs petty acts of vengeance, pouring nail polish over a sister-in-law's splendid new silk saris, and tattling on a niece's affair with a neighbor's son. Somnath—who, as an evil child, found his pleasure in torturing insects, thrashing cats, and, during the famine when beggars came to the door for food, snatching bowls of gruel out of their hands and spilling them on the ground to watch them lick it—has been raping housemaids in the neighborhood, something the family deals with by arranging for him to marry a country girl from a poor family whom they can bully and intimidate and who will not complain—first as the wife of a brute and then as a traditional Hindu widow.

Through it all, Madan, the loyal manservant who came to work for the family when he was about ten years old—no one is quite sure of his age—is still with them thirty years later. He has practically raised the children of the family, carrying them about when he was scarcely bigger than they were, singing to them, and nursing them when they were sick. Charubala has appreciated his services, including his excellent cooking and his overseeing the work of the other servants, and has even given him a few lessons in Bengali and arithmetic although never the time in which to study. "I hear so many stories of people educating their servants and then the upstarts leave



their homes and go and get a better job elsewhere.”

Mukherjee tells us in a rare authorial comment that there is “nothing new or unusual in all this; it runs along the well-ploughed furrows of middle-class Bengali life.” He appears to have taken an enormous risk of forfeiting the sympathy of his readers by creating a cast of characters almost uniformly odious, reprehensible, and amoral, but he has a reason and it is a good one: it creates a backdrop for the few characters who do not conform to this ugly pattern.

One is the youngest grandson, Sona, born an intuitive mathematician of genius, unrecognized by his family or his teachers so that he

becomes two persons, an outer one that goes through the motions required of him, and an inner one that is the true, pure he. The shell does the rote-learning, the core attends to his current obsession with even perfect numbers and how, and if, they relate to the universal set of his greater obsession: primes.

Only the eldest grandson, Supratik, recognizes his quality:

How detached he is from everything!... That resilience to the outside world, that capacity of not being damaged, even lightly scratched, by it—what wouldn't I give to be blessed with that?

But he is not, and it is Supratik's revolt against the world that he alone sees stripped of all its illusions that forms the core of Mukherjee's book, conveyed chiefly in letters that he writes but never sends and that intersperse the chapters. It is he who will take us out of the suffocating Ghosh household and into the world outside.

The first non-Congress government in Bengal, dominated by the pro-Moscow CPI and CPI(M), has come to power. Presidency College, where Supratik is a student, has voted in the first Communist students' union. Calcutta University has closed down for the first time in its history. There are food riots all over the state. Supratik has become a student activist, organizing class boycotts, going on marches, chanting “Your name, my name/Viet-nam, Viet-nam” and “Blood-bright Vietnam is Bengal's other name.” (Aficionados of Satyajit Ray's films may remember the scene in *The Adversary* where a young man in search of a job goes for an interview, is asked what he thinks is the most significant event of the decade, and replies, “Vietnam.” “What, not man's walk on the moon?” “No,” he insists, “Vietnam.” He will not get the job.)

But Supratik has come to think of all such student activities as a sideshow, a diversion, that the strikes—student strike, bus strike, tram strike—changed nothing, “the condition of the people remained unchanged. Life carried on as before.” He now thinks of

all this ferment as boring and inconsequential compared with what I really had in mind—armed peasant rebellion, an entire and comprehensive rehauling of everything.... Placed beside this aim, all this student unrest was like flies buzzing around a horse.... It be-

came clear to me that the last thing the CPI(M) was interested in was radical change.... All they wanted was power.

He finds it intolerable to stay in this situation when “something else was taking shape, something that was going to explode like a thousand suns in an unsuspecting sky—Naxalbari.” That word refers to the remote district in the north of Bengal, not far from the border with China, where the first clash between armed peasants and the police took place, giving its name to the revolution: Naxalite. Its leader was Charu Mazumdar, whose “electric” writings in *Liberation* had formed Supratik's politics. He observes, “Being a Bengali, one is surprised when all the endless spume and froth of talk suddenly reveals itself to be the front of a gigantic wave of action.”

His mother watches him change—he has grown thin, cadaverous, bearded “like a starving mystic, a Naga sanyasi on the banks of the Ganga.” He hardly speaks to anyone but “there is an incandescence about him: the large, blazing black eyes are devouring in their intensity.” While she plies him with food, he protests:

“You give me so much.... Don't you agree we eat too much?”

“...We have always been like this, what's wrong with our way of eating? Everyone eats like this.”

“No, not everyone eats like this, Ma.... The other people who work for us, do they eat like us?”

“Tsk, but they are servants. They eat differently.”

“Can you explain to me why the servants eat differently while they live in the same house?”...

“This is the way it is. It has always been like this.”

But Supratik won't have it and one day his mother finds a letter he has placed under the statuette of the goddess Lakshmi on their family altar:

Ma, I feel exhausted with consuming, with taking and grabbing and using. I am so bloated that I feel I cannot breathe anymore. I am leaving to find some air, some place where I shall be able to purge myself, push back against the life given me and make my own.

So he leaves the city “to work with landless peasants, the sharecroppers, wage-labourers and impoverished tenants.” Unsurprisingly, it proves difficult for the city-bred, college-educated idealists who join him to persuade the peasants that they are not party workers come for their votes but are committed to “real and radical land reforms.” One farmer tells them:

Twenty years we've been independent of foreign rule but things have remained the same for us. No, they've got much worse. At that time we used to be told that the sahebs are sucking our blood dry, the sahebs are taking our land away, our crops away, the sahebs have stolen all our possessions from us, but the sahebs have long gone now, why are things still the same? We're foolish, illiterate people, we can't read, we don't understand much,

but we understand at least this: the bloodsuckers are still there, their skin colour has changed. That's the only change that has happened.

Supratik admits:

What I hadn't reckoned with was that decades and decades of this slow-burning flame of resentment and deprivation had burned *them*, not the perpetrators. The embers of anger we had thought of fanning had burned down into the ashes of despair. They were already dead within their lives.... In other words, we had to kindle a fire with ashes. Have you ever tried doing that?

Try they must and they do: living with the peasants in their huts, learning to



Neel Mukherjee

use the sickle, working in the fields but aware that this is only a phase as they move toward their true goal: militant action. Waylaying a rich landlord—the one who had caused the death of Nitai Das in the prologue—on his way home from a fair in the dark and stabbing him to death is a beginning, but it is when they succeed in engaging the peasants themselves in robbing a landlord's house and granary, murdering him, and distributing the grain that Supratik wants “to shout and embrace everyone and tell the whole world that revolting against oppressors was the natural state of man.”

The euphoria does not last. They had not realized that it would not be they but the peasants who would bear the brunt of the police action that followed. Their villages are raided, the men taken away, and the presence of the outsiders is no longer welcome. Admitting that their “ignorance and amateurish planning and laughable resources” had brought about not triumph but failure, they take refuge in the forest. There is no safety to be found there; the police and the military are everywhere; the “notorious Naxalite purges of 1970 and '71” have begun. The time has come to make a tactical retreat to the city and enter into the next phase of the revolution, which “boils down to a bare economics: if they cannot find enough money to finance their defence, they will be wiped out.”

So Supratik finds himself back at the house on Basanta Bose Road and what is known as “the bosom of the family.” It proves a hard one: no one treats

him as a returning hero. His father tells him, “You've blackened our face. You've brought so much shame upon us that we cannot show our face to the outside world any more.” When he discovers that his brother Suranjan has descended into a life of drug addiction and upbraids him, Suranjan sneers:

Big words about *the poisons of our generation* don't suit you. Your terrorism, your poison, is not without its side-effects.... What have *you* been doing all these years? Playing at revolutionaries, terrorism, killings, bombings.... What you do is revolution, of course, what others do is idleness and wastage.... You are unable to understand anyone unless they fit into the standard-issue mould you have made for them. Chairman Mao! My cock!

Even the forbearing servant Madan tells Supratik, “Boro-babu, the world does not change, you destroy yourself trying to change it, but it remains as it is. The world is very big, and we are very small.”

The reader might think that all the energy and momentum of Mukherjee's extraordinary epic has come to an end; it is now deflated, moribund. But the final act of the drama is still to come and it is the more potent for being unforeseen.

A theft takes place: Purnima's jewelry is stolen. As is usual, the servants are the first suspects. The police are called in to question them, even Madan, who has worked for them since childhood and is considered a part of the family. Purnima's gold and ruby ring has been found in his room. Everyone is shocked; the chorus of “No, this must be a mistake” is unanimous. Only Supratik's reaction is different: “If Madan-da has really taken Boro-kaki's jewellery, all power to him. They are poor people, the stuff is going to be useful to them. Your lot have more than enough already.” It is known that Madan has set up his son with an electric goods shop, motive enough for the police to haul him away. But then, stunningly, they return for Supratik: they are aware of his role in the debacle and it provides the book with its final and most devastating shock—of a terrible betrayal, or is it of a terrible sacrifice? Can they be the same? And does the end ever justify the means? Can it? Rarely has the conundrum been more powerfully presented.

Mukherjee attaches two short epilogues that give the reader some sense—certainly not of “closure” but a conclusion of sorts, perhaps even of justice in a uniformly unjust world.

The first is a newspaper report from 1986 of the award of the Fields Medal, the highest honor given to a mathematician under the age of forty, to the Indian mathematician Professor Swarnendu Ghosh, followed by an account of his brilliant career and his reclusive life with his widowed mother on the campus of Stanford University. The medal bears the inscription in Latin: “To rise above oneself and to master the world.”

The second is a scene set in a Bengal forest in September 2012:

They came out of the forest as if spawned by the night itself; the trees sending out their new kind of children.... They are silent like the scrub that surrounds them, or



the red, dry earth out of which they have sprung.

In the darkness they go to work on a railway track running through an area so remote no one would venture there

at night for “fear of Maoists,” dislodging the fish plates that hold the track in alignment. It is a technique ascribed to one known to them not as Supratik but as “Pratik-da,” who operated in the area in the 1960s; he was no longer alive

but “his gift to his future comrades survived and, for those who cared to or were old enough to remember, he lived on in his bequest.”

When Mukherjee writes that “the night needs watching...the darkness

skitters and slides between being a friend and an enemy with alarming unpredictability,” it could be of himself he is writing as he follows the lives of others, immersing himself in their darkness. □

# The Greening Genius of Thomas Browne

Keith Thomas

**Sir Thomas Browne: A Life**  
by Reid Barbour.  
Oxford University Press,  
534 pp., \$125.00

**In Search of Sir Thomas Browne:  
The Life and Afterlife of  
the Seventeenth Century's  
Most Inquiring Mind**  
by Hugh Aldersey-Williams.  
Norton, 330 pp., \$26.95

**Thomas Browne**  
edited by Kevin Killeen.  
Oxford University Press,  
995 pp., \$160.00

**Religio Medici and Urne-Buriall**  
by Sir Thomas Browne,  
edited and with an introduction  
by Stephen Greenblatt  
and Ramie Targoff.  
New York Review Books,  
170 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

Thomas Browne (1605–1682) is by common consent the author of some of the finest prose in the English language. Nowhere is it finer than in *Hydriotaphia, Urne Buriall*, his meditation on funeral customs, death, and immortality. The magical opening of its dedication, “When the funerall pyre was out, and the last valediction was over...,” prepares us for the sublime final chapter:

Oblivion is not to be hired: the greater part must be content to be as though they had not been, to be found in the register of God, not in the record of man... But man is a noble animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave.

Some of Browne’s famous sentences are distinctly delphic: “But the quincunx [five points arranged in an X] of Heaven runs low, and ’tis time to close the five ports of knowledge.” Others are melodious, but puzzling if one takes them too literally: “The huntsmen are up in America, and they are already past their first sleep in Persia.” Many are unsettlingly ironic: “The night of time far surpasseth the day, and who knows when was the Aequinox?” “In vain we compute our felicities by the advantage of our good names, since bad have equall durations; and Thersites is like to live as long as Agamemnon.”

English Romantics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb delighted in Browne’s sonorities, and adored what William Hazlitt called his “intricate folds and swelling drapery of dark sayings and impenetrable riddles.” Browne’s later admirers included Herman Melville, Virginia Woolf, Jorge

Luis Borges, and W.G. Sebald, all of them people who were “the more interesting for a little *Twist* in the Brains,” as Coleridge said of Browne.

Yet Browne’s poetic prose, with its fearsome range of recondite allusion, can be labyrinthine, obscure, and even muddled. His digressions, paradoxes, and contradictions often make his arguments hard to follow and his conclusions elusive. The virtuoso Sir Kenelm Digby told Browne that *Religio Medici*, his youthful confession of faith, was “so strongly penned, as requireth much time, and sharp attention but to comprehend it.” The economist Sir William Petty thought it appealed only to people “who do not trouble themselves to examine the force of an argument which pleases them in the delivery.” It was in reaction to Browne’s extravagances that Robert Boyle avoided exotic words and terms borrowed from other languages, and the newly founded Royal Society rejected “all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style,” proclaiming its allegiance to “mathematical plainness” and “a close, naked, natural way of speaking.”

Browne’s neologisms must have baffled the contemporary reader. *The Oxford English Dictionary* records nearly eight hundred words that allegedly make their first appearance in his writings (and often their last). Recourse to *Early English Books Online*, a database that was unavailable when *The Oxford English Dictionary* was compiled, suggests that this figure is a huge exaggeration. But it is true that Browne was particularly fond of Latinate coinages like *antediluvian* or *retromingent*

(urinating backward); and he employed them to make fine analytic distinctions, as in a letter to John Evelyn:

The crowns and garlands of the ancients were either gestatory, such as they wore about their heads or necks; portatory, such as they carried at solemn festivals; pensile or suspensory, such as they hanged about the posts of their houses in honour of their gods, as of Jupiter Thyraeus or Limeneus; or else they were depository, such as they laid upon the graves and monuments of the dead. And these were made up after all ways of art, compactile, sutile, plectile.

Browne wryly admitted that if he continued in this vein, it would soon be necessary to learn Latin in order to understand English. Today, when a knowledge of the Latin language is largely confined to professional scholars, his prose can seem formidably difficult. We may think that we understand Browne when he writes, “What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions are not beyond all conjecture.” But he himself thought it necessary to add a marginal note explaining that the “puzzling questions” about Achilles and the Sirens were those put to the Greek grammarians by the emperor Tiberius. Most readers need a battery of explanatory notes, like those that take up 150 pages at the end of Kevin Killeen’s welcome one-volume collection of Browne’s main works, a preliminary to an eight-volume scholarly



Lady Dorothy Browne and Sir Thomas Browne; portrait by Joan Carlisle, circa 1641–1650

National Portrait Gallery, London

edition currently planned by Oxford University Press.

In 1915 a critic could declare that “the value of Browne now lies wholly in his style.”<sup>1</sup> A hundred years later, literary scholars are less concerned with stylistics than they used to be, though the idiosyncrasies of Browne’s writing are admirably evoked by Stephen Greenblatt and Ramie Targoff in their recent introduction to his two best-known works. Most commentators on Browne have shifted from analyzing his prose to fitting him back into his seventeenth-century setting, intellectual, social, and political. They are more interested in him as a proto-scientist than as a literary artist, and they regard as his masterpiece not *Hydriotaphia* but *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, an encyclopedic exposure of errors, vulgar and learned, written in what is, by Browne’s standards, relatively unpretentious language.<sup>2</sup>

The preoccupation with historical setting is particularly evident in Reid Barbour’s enormously learned biography, which is as much about the different places in which Browne studied and wrote as it is about the man himself. Barbour’s intensive research has not changed the chronology of Browne’s life in any important respect. The son of a London dealer in fine fabrics who died when he was still a child, Browne was educated at Winchester College and Broadgates Hall, Oxford, which turned into Pembroke College while he was there. (Pembroke would also be the alma mater of Dr. Samuel Johnson, who published a short life of Browne in 1756.) After Oxford, Browne studied at the universities of Montpellier, Padua, and Leyden, graduating from the last as an MD in 1633. On his return to England, he served a three-year medical apprenticeship in Halifax, West Yorkshire, after which he moved to Norwich, where he married Dorothy Mileham, a member of a prominent local family, and built up a lucrative medical practice among the Norfolk gentry.

His first and most famous work, *Religio Medici*, written in the 1630s, was

<sup>1</sup>Hugh Walker, *The English Essay and Essayists* (London: J.M. Dent, 1915), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup>“Nobody, it is probable, has ever considered *Pseudodoxia* to be Browne’s masterpiece,” remarks Kevin Killeen in the introduction to his edition, forgetting perhaps that he himself made that very claim in his monograph *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Ashgate, 2009), p. 6.



a baroque display of rhetorical skill, both beguilingly candid and exquisitely artificial. Its unauthorized publication in 1642, followed by the official version in 1643, made him an instant celebrity. There were a further nine English editions in Browne's lifetime, translations into Latin, Dutch, French, and German, and the honor of being placed on the Papal Index. Browne's reputation was consolidated by the appearance in 1646 of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. This was both a museum of curiosities and a deeply erudite synthesis of a vast range of European learning. It too was frequently reissued and widely translated. It was followed in 1658 by a pair of shorter tracts: *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall, or, a Discourse of the Sepulchral Urnes lately found in Norfolk* and *The Garden of Cyrus*, a numerical reverie on the horticultural practices of the ancients.

Other works were published after Browne's death, but these were the ones for which he was celebrated in his lifetime and also those most valued by posterity. For all his fame, he continued to live quietly in Norwich, treating his patients, carrying out experiments, closely observing the natural world around him, conducting a huge international correspondence on learned topics, and, as he explained, composing his books in the "snatches of time" that "the fruitlesse importunity of uroscopy [the inspection of urines] would permit us."

Browne lived in the last age of the polymath, when European scholars still aspired to universal learning. He knew six languages, had a large library, and was celebrated for remembering "all that was remarkable in any book that he had read." His repertoire embraced biblical history and commentary, the whole of the ancient world, and most contemporary European writing on history, geography, and philology, along with natural philosophy and medicine in all its aspects. He turned his house and garden into a cabinet of curiosities, with a huge collection of birds' eggs, medals, and books, along with animals, insects, birds, and fish, living and dead. Cranes, eagles, storks, seagulls, ostriches, and pelicans were all represented.

Browne was a botanist who studied the plants of Norfolk, a zoologist who listed animal species, a meteorologist who pondered the causes of mists and thunder, a biblical critic who exposed innumerable mistakes that arose from taking scripture literally, an antiquarian interested in archaeological excavations, and an anthropologist with a relish for the oddity and variety of human customs. He played no public part in the great upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century, but his private sympathies were royalist; he loved the ritual of the Laudian Church, deplored the execution of Charles I, and championed church music at a time when the Puritans were destroying the organ in Norwich cathedral. He emerged briefly into the limelight in 1671, when he was knighted by Charles II on a royal visit to Norwich, a quite exceptional honor in those days for a physician or a scholar.

Barbour thickens this familiar story at every stage, for example by establishing that Browne's doctoral dissertation at Leyden was on smallpox, confirming that the original version of

*Religio Medici* was written in Halifax, and revealing that its author was probably captured by pirates when he visited Ireland in 1623 with his stepfather, the military adventurer Sir Thomas Dutton. He resolves many minor cruxes in Browne's career and leaves few avenues unexplored. It would have been good, though, to have been told more about Browne's private finances, for he could never have supported what was effectively a domestic research laboratory without substantial resources. His income as a successful physician was £1,000 a year, which put him in the top bracket of the nation's earners, and he also owned landed property.

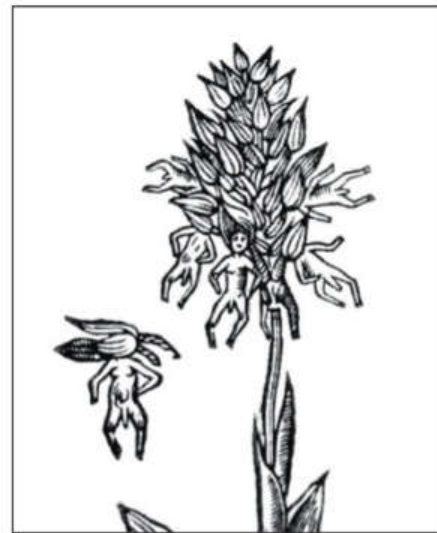
The thoroughness of Barbour's research and his meticulous attention to detail will make his book indispensable to all future students of Browne. That said, his rather ponderous prose abounds in minor infelicities, including the occasional malapropism; and the meaning of some of his sentences is as obscure as those composed by his subject. His most original contribution is his account of the intellectual influences that made Browne such a prodigy of universal learning and gave him his distinctive combination of wit, eloquence, skepticism, and piety.

Barbour points to the formative experience of his education at Winchester, where the master, Hugh Robinson, provided not just an extensive training in classical rhetoric and composition, but also an introduction to hieroglyphics and the critical study of human and scriptural history. At Oxford, Browne's college was the center of medical and anatomical studies; its master, Thomas Clayton, exemplified the model of the pious physician envisaged in *Religio Medici*. Browne learned cosmography, mathematics, and natural philosophy from Robert Hues, who had circumnavigated the globe with Thomas Cavendish, and theology from his doctrinally unorthodox tutor Thomas Lushington, whose skeptical emphasis on the limits of human reason left a permanent mark on his pupil's thinking.

Even more influential were Browne's subsequent studies abroad. At Montpellier he broadened his medical education and learned to be tolerant of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. At Padua he encountered sophisticated religious skepticism and a tradition of philosophical atheism. The anatomy theater and botanical garden at Padua "made an indelible impression." So did the neoscholasticism of the philosophy professor Fortunio Liceti, whose reflections on the soul and the body invoked Platonic mysteries and Egyptian hieroglyphs to show how atheism could be refuted. At Leyden, by contrast, the medical ethos was strongly practical. Browne's experience there, thinks, Barbour, "drove home the value of a minimalist, utilitarian, duty-bound approach to his profession—and his life."

Of course, it is one thing to describe the differing intellectual environments in which Browne found himself, another to be sure about the influence they had upon him. Barbour's account of Browne's early years is frequently interlaced with words like "possibly," "probably," and "perhaps." Nevertheless, he persuasively demonstrates that Browne's years of immersion in European academic and religious life brought an extra dimension to his writing.

Hugh Aldersey-Williams, the author of *In Search of Sir Thomas Browne*, is a writer on design, with a scientific background. He first became aware of Browne when working on a book about the discovery of buckminsterfullerene. This is a form of carbon whose molecules display a five-fold patterning, similar to that which the author of *The Garden of Cyrus* showed to be widespread in nature. For Aldersey-Williams, who now lives in Norfolk, Browne is a local hero and an obsession. He has traced his movements in the surrounding countryside, sought vainly for traces of his house and garden, now buried under the shopping malls of modern Norwich, and communed with his bronze statue, erected by the city in 1905 to mark his tercentenary. Twelve pages of his book record



The 'man Orchis of Columna,' a flower with the shape of a man, mentioned by Sir Thomas Browne in *The Garden of Cyrus*

John Innes Centre, Norwich

a conversation in which Browne steps down from his pedestal to explain his views on religion, science, and Richard Dawkins.

Aldersey-Williams writes as an enthusiast rather than a scholar. His exposition of Browne's ideas is punctuated by lengthy ruminations on such varied topics as homeopathy, child abuse, TV nature programs, antidepressants, and changes in Norfolk's bird life. In long sections of the book Browne slides out of view altogether. Aldersey-Williams wants to show that Browne deserves to be better known because he has lessons to teach the modern world. These lessons include the meaning of order in nature, the reconciliation of science and religion, the need to disabuse the credulous of foolish beliefs, and the way in which we should think about life and death. He cannot forgive Browne for believing in witchcraft; and he deplores his notorious wish that "we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this trivial and vulgar way of coition."<sup>3</sup> But he regards Browne as a model instructor of the scientifically ignorant and believes that his contribution to science has been seriously underestimated.

Here he is rather behind the curve, for Browne's importance as a scientist has been the central theme of much recent scholarship, notably Claire Preston's influential study, *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science*

(2005), which is included in his bibliography, and Kevin Killeen's illuminating analysis of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, which is not. Aldersey-Williams gives a lively account of Browne's intense interest in birds, animals, fish, and other forms of life, and his refutation of such notions as that moles were blind, that storks would prosper only in republics, and that badgers' legs were shorter on one side than the other. He admits, however, that Browne did not reject the possibility that some elephants had written whole sentences and could speak; and he tolerated the literary and artistic portrayal of flying horses, centaurs, and satyrs, on the grounds that their "shadowed moralities requite their substantial falsities."

Aldersey-Williams is particularly enthusiastic about Browne's study of plants. *The Garden of Cyrus* begins with the ancient Persian practice of planting orchards in sets of five trees arranged as a quincunx, so that "a regular angularity, and through prospect, was left on every side." Browne explores the ubiquity of this figure of the quincunx and the number five in man-made objects, in philosophy, theology, and, above all, the natural world, for he believed that "nature geometrized, and observeth order in all things." To support his argument he draws upon his vast armory of biblical and classical learning, supplemented by botanical knowledge derived from years of intensive observation of East Anglian flora.

It seems that his main thesis was correct, for Aldersey-Williams, with his keen interest in pattern and design, tells us that five-fold symmetry is indeed widespread in both nature and human culture. Other scientists could have discovered that, but only Browne was capable of writing of the prickly, purple head of the teasle (*dipsacus*) that "he that considereth that fabrick so regularly palisadoed, and stemm'd with flowers of the royall colour; in the house of the solitary maggot,<sup>4</sup> may finde the seraglio of Solomon."

*The Garden of Cyrus* reveals Browne's botanical learning and his keen interest in the process of generation, but his claim to be regarded as an important scientist must rest primarily upon his magnum opus, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, a systematic refutation of hundreds of erroneous beliefs, some about biblical and human history, and others relating to different branches of natural philosophy. Aldersey-Williams believes that this work contains basic principles of physics and chemistry that would not be clearly set out for another century or so. He also claims that it reveals Browne as a pioneer of the experimental method. He quotes the passage in *The Garden of Cyrus* where Browne asserts that, although "discursive enquiry and rationall conjecture" are valuable weapons, it is only "sense and ocular observation" that can strike the "dispatching blows unto error"; and he cites the practical test that Browne carried out to show the falsity of the popular belief that a dead kingfisher made a good weather vane.

Yet though *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* contains over one hundred proposi-

<sup>3</sup>Later critics have gleefully pointed out that this sentiment did not prevent Browne from subsequently marrying and fathering eleven children.

<sup>4</sup>"There being a single Maggot found almost in every head" (Browne's marginal note).



tions in natural history that Browne personally tested by experiment, his normal approach is unremittingly bookish. Aldersey-Williams does not remind us that Browne lists “the three determinators of truth” as “authority, sense and reason”; and that, of these, the most prominent in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* is authority. Despite his prefatory promise to rely on “experience and reason,” Browne’s refutations of vulgar errors depend heavily upon the writings of others.

In Browne’s day the old ideal of an immensely erudite collection of facts was giving way to a slimmer and more rigorous reliance on measurement and quantification. His contemporary Thomas Hobbes despised universal learning, declaring that if he had read as many books as other men he would have known no more than other men. Browne’s insatiable taste for the strange and mysterious led to an obsession with freaks and curiosities, whereas it was from the investigation of everyday regularities that real scientific progress would come. In 1665–1666 the young Isaac Newton made huge mathematical advances and began to think about universal gravitation. Two years later, Browne presented the Royal Society with a great petrified bone, a double goose egg, the one included in the other, and a stone bottle that had been filled with Málaga wine seven years earlier, but though sealed was now almost empty, its outside covered with “a thick mucous coat.”

Browne’s appreciation of the natural world was as much mystical and aesthetic as “scientific.” “Very beautiful is the rainebow,” he writes. “It compasseth the heaven about with a glorious circle, and the hands of the most high have bended it.” As a modern atheist, Aldersey-Williams is naturally perplexed by Browne’s religion. *Religio Medici* is a recognizable example of the introspective soul-searching that the Protestant Reformation did so much to encourage. Browne was not the only person in his day to feel “a Hell within my selfe” and to conduct an internal “battell of Lepanto.”

Compared with John Bunyan’s intense account of his spiritual conflicts and conversion experience, *Religio Medici* seems slippery and flippant. Browne explained that it was “to be taken in a soft and flexible sense, and not to be called unto the rigid test of reason.” It is clear that the youthful Browne had temporarily succumbed to Pyrrhonism, the skeptical belief that Christian doctrine could not survive the scrutiny of reason. He resolved his crisis, not by embracing a new rational religion, but by deciding that, although reason could demonstrate the hand of God in the workings of nature, it had to be accompanied by faith, which involved believing “a thing not only above, but contrary to reason, and against the arguments of our proper senses.” How otherwise could he accept that at the Resurrection “our estranged and divided ashes shall unite againe”?<sup>5</sup>

Browne saw no conflict between science and religion. Research into na-

ture was a religious duty: “the world was made to be inhabited by beasts, but studied and contemplated by man: ’tis the debt of our reason we owe unto God, and the homage we pay for not being beasts.” Yet man was fallen and human reason imperfect: only in the next world would the full truth be revealed. Meanwhile, Browne declared his refusal to censure those who held divergent theological views. He was hostile to religious persecution, and he hoped for a reconciliation between the Protestant and Catholic churches. This was not a popular view in 1643, when the country was tearing itself apart over religious differences, and when many of Browne’s contemporaries regarded the pope as Antichrist and thought that heathens deserved to go to Hell.

Aldersey-Williams admires Browne for his remarkable tolerance, though he also reminds us of its limits. Browne regarded “the Alcoran of the Turks” as “an ill composed piece, containing in it vaine and ridiculous errors in philosophy, impossibilities, fictions, and vanities beyond laughter”; it was maintained by “banishment of learning,” and disseminated by “armes and violence.” He professed to be a cosmopolitan, free from national prejudices; and he vigorously refuted the notion “that Jews stinck,” “it being a dangerous point to annex a constant property unto any nation.” Yet he also spoke pejoratively of “that contemptible and degenerate issue of Jacob,” because they persisted in “an obstinate and peremptory belief” and stuck stubbornly to their own religion.

Toward the natural world, by contrast, Brown’s tolerance was unqualified. He saw a “generall beauty in the works of God, and therefore no deformity in any kind or species of creature whatsoever.” He could not tell “by what logick we call a toad, a beare, or an elephant, ugly, they being created in those outward shapes and figures which best expresse the actions of their inward formes.” When he saw a toad or a viper he had no desire to take up a stone to kill it. Humankind was also God’s creation and there was therefore no reason why black people should not be regarded as beautiful.

Aldersey-Williams even credits Browne with “a vivid postcolonial imagination.” In his posthumously published *Prophecy concerning the State of Several Nations* Browne correctly predicted that Mexico City would grow larger than Madrid, that the Dutch East Indies would become independent of Holland, and that African slavery would end and the continent be converted, partly to Christianity, but chiefly to Islam. His further predictions, so far unfulfilled, but perhaps not wholly out of the question, were that the Americans would invade Europe and that Islamic ships would appear in the Baltic.

The moral of *Hydriotaphia* is that “the sufficiency of Christian immortality frustrates all earthly glory, and... makes a folly of posthumous memory.” Browne accordingly claimed that at his death he intended “to take a tall adieu of the world, not caring for a monument, history, or epitaph, not so much as the bare memory of my name to be found any where but in the universall register of God.” The irony is that, 333 years later, his memory has never been greener. □

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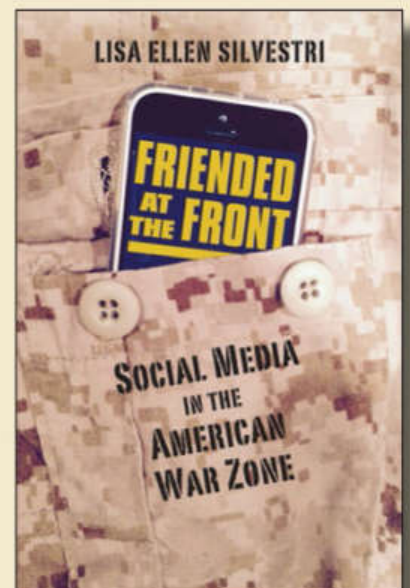
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# The Vanishing Europe of Jürgen Habermas

Jeremy Waldron

**The Lure of Technocracy**  
by Jürgen Habermas,  
translated from the German  
by Ciaran Cronin.  
Polity, 176 pp., \$64.95; \$22.95 (paper)

## 1.

Of the many voices raised in Europe against Angela Merkel's and Wolfgang Schäuble's handling of the debt crisis in Greece, one of the most strident and uncompromising has been that of the eighty-six-year-old German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Long regarded as Europe's leading public intellectual, Habermas denounced the July 12 deal between Greece and the eurozone leaders as "an act of punishment against a leftwing government." It was, he said, a "toxic mixture of necessary structural reforms...with further neoliberal impositions that will completely discourage an exhausted Greek population and kill any impetus to growth."\*

In Habermas's view it was entirely understandable, in the Greek election last January and in the July 5 "referendum," that the people of Greece would vote for a government that would resist the "barbaric costs" of the austerity program imposed on them by the country's creditors. But though he understands the impulse for popular control, Habermas despairs of the nation-state as the appropriate domain for democratic politics in Europe. He is one of our most important theorists of democracy but the democracy he calls for is "post-national democracy," democracy that operates at precisely the level at which the objectionable impositions upon Athens have been made. He refuses to associate his denunciation of Merkel with the growing chorus of Euroskepticism on the left. On the contrary, he is passionately in favor of a united Europe. Habermas's views on all this add up to one of the most intriguing positions in modern European politics, and it is worth trying to get to the bottom of it.

There is, first of all, a sad irony in his denunciation. For many years, Germany had tried to redeem itself in Europe by displaying a "greater political sensitivity" to its neighbors and what Habermas called "a post-national mentality." He believes that after the moral catastrophe of World War II, Germany had no option but to seek European unification, so that his country could "develop a liberal self-understanding for the first time" by embedding itself in Western Europe. Much of his work has charted the ambivalence of this self-understanding in German politics. But he says now that it was the events of 1989–1990—the unification of Germany—that directed his attention to the legal and political reorganization of world society that had been taking shape in the meantime.

In recent years, he has devoted himself to the problems of the EU. Many

of his followers, he says, find this new preoccupation "tame" and "boring." But Habermas seems now to be utterly committed to the European project. And that makes the stand he has taken on the Greek crisis all the more challenging.

## 2.

*The Lure of Technocracy* is Habermas's fourth book on Europe. It was published in German in 2013 and it has just been translated into English. The book is a short collection of brief essays, most of them devoted to the prospects for European democracy and to Habermas's concerns about the alternative—what he calls "technocracy," the rule of experts.

Habermas is Europe's most formidable political philosopher. For a long time, the emphasis of his public writing was on Germany. And some of that remains. *The Lure of Technocracy* contains an interesting essay devoted to the return to Germany after the war of Jewish figures like Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, leaders in the Frankfurt School in which, in the 1950s and 1960s, Habermas pursued his concerns about the foundations of the new Germany and the mostly American model of culture and society that inspired it.

But his main concern in this book is with the future of democracy in Europe. Most European countries are democratic. Indeed, among the members of the European Union are some of the most respected democracies in the world. They have free and fair elections; they are open societies with free speech and freedom of association; and their officials can be counted on to carry out the laws that their elected representatives vote for. But can we say the same about the EU itself? It is supposed to be democratic: Article 10 of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty stipulates that "the functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy."

But the EU's functioning falls well short of this. Of its major institutions only the European Parliament has any direct elective credentials; and it has the least power. In *The Lure of Technocracy*, Habermas says that the Parliament "is supposed to establish a bridge between the political battles of opinions in the national arenas and the momentous decisions taken in Brussels." But, he laments, "there is hardly any traffic on this bridge." As for the other institutions, the best one can say is that the Council of Ministers (together with the commission that implements the council's decisions) derives its legitimacy from the ministers' credentials in their respective home democracies.

Does the EU need to be democratic?

It is not a state like France or Ireland. But the measures adopted by the commission and the Council of Ministers increasingly constrain the policies of the member states so that the democratic failings of the EU threaten to compromise democratic governance at the national level too. Things happen in Britain and Poland—involving maximum working hours, for example, or aspects of immigration policy—because of decisions made in Brussels rather than because of anything that

interesting to those whose allegiance to the great man has something of the character of an esoteric cult, of which they are oracles. Outside the charmed circle, however, readers may be tempted to neglect Habermas's philosophy altogether. That would be a pity, if only because his complex position on the EU and Greece is unintelligible apart from the depth of his commitments in democratic theory.

Any theory of democracy works, at base, with a fairly simple model, which it then maps onto the detail of actually existing institutional arrangements. A model is necessarily simple compared to the reality to which it applies, but its role is to help us see through the complexity to identify things that really matter to us, whether we are assessing elective institutions at Westminster or diagnosing democratic failings in the European Parliament.

Habermas's model begins with something that entranced Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau before him: the idea of self-legislation or political autonomy. In a democracy, laws are supposed to have legitimacy because the people to whom they are addressed are also their authors. Of course, our authorship of the laws that apply to us is offset by layers of institutional structure: elections, representation, majority decision, and the elaborate procedures that parliaments use to debate and enact a bill. Still, all of this is done in our name, and the institutional layers are supposed to be governed by a principle of political equality that gives each of us an equal say, direct or indirect, in the lawmaking process. In the final analysis these procedures are

us, making laws for ourselves.

To this model of people making laws for themselves, Habermas adds three additional layers. First, he frames the democratic process by emphasizing "deliberation." There are millions of us—hundreds of millions in the EU—diverse and opinionated. We disagree about what laws we need or want. But democracy means not only that we vote on these questions, but that each of us has to face up to all the arguments there are for and against a given measure. In some hands, this element of deliberation is understood in a solitary way—one assembles the reasons in one's head, so to speak, and reaches a conclusion for oneself about how to vote. But Habermas's model is irreducibly a matter of dialogue. We make law for ourselves in the company of others—all others who are going to be obligated—and if we are to meet democratic standards we convince ourselves that a given set of laws is necessary, if it is, by listening respectfully to what others say about the interests and values of theirs that are at stake in the matter.

This happens in formal deliberation in the legislature and it happens per-



Jürgen Habermas, Vienna, 2004

British or Polish citizens have voted for or for which their politicians can be held accountable.

Some political scientists believe that this talk of a "democratic deficit" in the European Union's institutions is exaggerated or that it doesn't really matter. Not Habermas. His view is that the EU was undemocratic in its inception and that the democratic deficit grows larger every day. And it is hard to think of a modern political philosopher who cares more about democracy or its absence.

As I said, Jürgen Habermas is Europe's most widely respected political philosopher. He brings to his analysis of the EU an understanding of democracy that is deeper than that of most intellectuals. *The Lure of Technocracy* is a small book, but behind it loom large volumes of Habermas's more abstract writings on the principles that inspire democratic procedures.

Habermas's philosophical writing is not the clearest in the history of political thought, and his ideas are convoluted and difficult. By contrast, his thoughts on Europe are incisive and direct. I suspect this makes them less

\*Philip Oltermann, "Merkel 'Gambling Away' Germany's Reputation Over Greece, Says Habermas," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2015. Additional footnotes appear in the Web version of this article at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).



vatively, too, in civil society—in the media and in the marketplace of ideas. Nowhere, not even in the most abstract reaches of his philosophical model, does Habermas ever lose sight of the importance of *the other person* in deliberation. So for him the question of how the citizens of Europe can really deliberate together is inescapable. His philosophical position does not allow him to accept that a technocrat in Brussels thinking rationally about public policy is any substitute for that.

A second layer concerns Habermas's idea of rationality and values. When people talk to each other, they are not, as he conceives such conversation, just engaged in instrumental reasoning. They are presenting to each other everything that is important to them about the matters under discussion, including ultimate values and concerns that go way beyond the economic considerations that pervade technocratic thinking. Some of Habermas's recent work has explored ways of making religious ideas intelligible across the divide that separates believers from their secular fellow citizens. A 2006 pamphlet has him in conversation with Pope Benedict XVI when the latter was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. That's a recent development. But the critique of instrumental rationality—of means/end reasoning oriented to insufficiently examined goals—has been a theme of Habermas's work since the 1950s. Like other members of the Frankfurt School, Habermas worried that we had created for ourselves an arid and dehumanized discourse of economic imperatives and satisfactions.

This too affects his view of European institutions. The Brussels-based technocracy doesn't just claim that it is better at "delivering the goods" than more inclusive participatory procedures would be. It changes our sense of what "the goods" are. Increasingly, technocratic expertise is defined according to a regime's ability to secure and enjoy the confidence of global markets through, for example, restrictions on the ability of national parliaments to regulate the economic activity of foreign investors. And this means other goods are sidelined:

A technocracy without democratic roots would have neither the power nor the motivation to accord sufficient weight to the demands of the electorate for social justice, status security, public services and collective goods, in the event of a conflict with the systemic demands for competitiveness and economic growth.

If democratic deliberation is to be rational, it must engage reasons and demands such as these, not just the accountant's arithmetic pointing to fiscal austerity.

The third thing that distinguishes Habermas's model is an insistence that democratic deliberation may be understood entirely in terms of the processes that it involves. Most philosophers come to democratic theory not only with an idealized set of fair political procedures in mind but also with an idealized view about what should count as just or appropriate outcomes of these procedures. In the institutions they advocate—whether it is a system

of representation or a constitutional court—they seek some sort of adjustment or compromise between democratic procedures and just outcomes.

Certainly Habermas, a long-standing social democrat, has his own views on what would be just outcomes, and these have played an important part in his argument about Greece. But as I read him, he is not trying to present a model in which the desirability of certain outcomes would count as a reason for constraining the procedures of institutional democracy. Instead, what we see on nearly every page he has ever written is a commitment to the view that when we idealize democratic procedures—when we try to define "an ideal speech situation" for political deliberation that respects everyone as a potential contributor—our



theory is to be built up out of nothing but procedural concerns. Habermas's theory "attributes legitimizing force to the process of democratic opinion- and will-formation *itself*." The crucial questions for Habermas are: Who is included, who is not included? Who is being silenced or browbeaten? Whose interests are being allowed to distort the process of communication? Political legitimacy for Habermas comes from respectful and thorough answers to questions like these—not, certainly, from populist demagoguery, but at the same time not from institutional mechanisms like the European Central Bank or the European Court of Justice, both of which finesse democratic procedures.

This means that his concern about the absence of democratic procedures in the EU is pretty much nonnegotiable. It doesn't matter that the Brussels technocrats—often under pressure from the more powerful nations, such as Germany—come up with right answers if those answers do not actually emerge from a fair participatory process. Certainly, he tells us, there is "no lack of proposals that cast the existing democratic deficits [i.e., the lack of democratic participation and consent] in a flattering light through a shrewd reduction of democratic standards." But Habermas's own philosophical commitments mean that he has to repudiate all such philosophical tricks.

### 3.

If democracy is so important, then why not treat the undemocratic character of

the EU as a ground for Euroskepticism? Why not scramble back to "the reliable shelter of the nation-state," where at least something like democratic governance is available? Britain may well try to do this in the referendum on EU membership that David Cameron has promised in the next two years. And some of Habermas's comrades on the German left take this position too.

The answer, for Habermas, is that particular nations no longer have the sort of control of their own destiny that would make this reversion worthwhile. "It is counterproductive," he says, "to cling to the state-centered tradition of modern political thought." Embedded capitalism—the version that located major capitalist industries within the economies and legal systems of particular countries—has, Habermas argues, run its course and globalized markets are outstripping national politics. Financial markets cannot be mastered by particular sovereign states. If all our faith is invested in national-level democracy, then we will forfeit democratic control of many of our most important economic decisions.

In any case, the siren song of technocracy is sounding at the national level as well. What Habermas calls the "technocratic hollowing out of democracy" is already apparent within national systems of government. It is not that Habermas wants to denigrate the democracy of particular states. Some of the passion behind his post-national vision is for the institutions of social justice and social welfare that have been fostered by national democracies. But that achievement now needs democratic stewardship at a global or at least a regional level. And he wants to strengthen, not weaken, that stewardship in Europe. "I do not see how a return to nation states that have to be run like big corporations in a global market can counter the tendency towards de-democratisation and growing social inequality," he told *The Guardian* recently.

### 4.

For many, there remains a stumbling block: How can there possibly be democratic decision-making in Europe if there is no European *demos*? As things stand, public opinion in Europe remains thoroughly immured in the politics of the twenty-eight member states. The citizens whom Habermas is urging to think like Europeans read their own national newspapers, they form political parties in their own countries, and they are extremely sensitive about aspects of EU policy that involve redistribution of resources, opportunities, or burdens across national boundaries. The recent crises over responsibility for asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East foundering in their boats in the Mediterranean—and facing fences and other barriers on the European mainland—are but one example.

Habermas cannot afford to flinch from this difficulty. If anything, the problems that Europhobes point to are deepened by his political philosophy. For his model of democracy requires above all a public whose members talk to one another, whose "national public spheres gradually *open themselves up to each other*," from Portugal to Poland and from Ireland to Greece. Quite apart from linguistic and cultural dif-

ficulties (about which he does not say nearly enough), what he calls "the transnationalization of the existing national publics" will have to involve interest groups and parties organized at the European level, and activists and intellectuals (like himself) with what he calls a pan-European profile. Newspapers and television channels will have to "thematize... European issues as such" and if they are national media they will have to report on the "controversies which the same topics evoke in other member states."

Not only that, but Europeans need to form themselves into a political community whose "members... can feel responsibility *for one another*." Habermas believes this is a matter of transforming one "we-perspective" into another. In this, he is encouraged by his conviction that existing nation-state communities did not develop spontaneously, any more than the EU did; instead each one was "legally constructed" as an organized form of political integration. In a state of seventy or eighty million people, solidarity with one's fellow nationals is itself an abstraction, and if it has been made to work in Britain or France or Italy, might it not be made to work at the European level as well? Opposition in Europe to EU integration, he says, is not necessarily xenophobic or "reactive clinging to naturalized characteristics of ethno-national origin." It is rather "the insistence of self-conscious citizens on the *normative* achievements of their respective nation-states." As such it is not an insurmountable obstacle to the sort of vision Habermas has in mind.

Some agree with Carl Schmitt (a former Nazi thinker who enjoys a remarkable following among modern political theorists) that you cannot forge a political identity without an enemy to give sharpness to its boundaries. Habermas rightly rejects this as dangerous nonsense. Yet I wonder whether he isn't occasionally tempted by something of this kind. Sometimes he suggests that European identity might be sharpened by a sort of tepid anti-Americanism. In an essay cosigned by Jacques Derrida, Habermas cited "February 15, 2003," the day on which tens of thousands of people in London, Rome, Madrid, Barcelona, Berlin, and Paris protested the invasion of Iraq in some of the largest demonstrations seen since the end of World War II, as the harbinger of "the birth of a European public."

This seems to me rather thin. For one thing, the demonstrations were echoed in New York and Los Angeles—and in London also (which Habermas associates with the US in this enmity). For another thing, he exaggerates the extent of anti-American sentiment: Is it really true that "the overwhelming majority of Western Europeans responded with one voice to the reckless war of George Bush, Jr."? Anyway, the suggestion is ephemeral. Who now remembers February 15—or even 15 February—as though it were like September 11? It is, I think, unworthy of Habermas's cosmopolitan vision.

In many respects, the US works as an exemplar for Habermas, not as a point of Schmittian otherness. He takes the American experience as encouraging evidence that people, in a country of immigrants, can hold layered and incompletely integrated political identities. His well-known theory of constitutional patriotism explains the growth



of a “we, the people” mentality as a nonethnic basis for American identity. A similar kind of patriotism is crucial for what Habermas has in mind for Europe. European constitutional patriotism, as he envisages it, will no doubt differ in some respects from the US version. It will look to principles that would be challenged by some powerful social and political forces in the US, principles such as

secularism, the priority of the state to the market, the primacy of social solidarity over “merit,”...rejection of the law of the stronger, and the commitment to peace as a

result of the historical experience of loss.

But the form is supposed to be the same: an identity organized around a constitution rather than around a particular ethnicity.

It is hard to know how optimistic Habermas is in all of this. He is utterly committed to European democracy, but sometimes he seems quite alone in his commitment. “Today,” he says, “I cannot identify anyone anywhere in Europe who would risk a polarizing election campaign to mobilize majorities for Europe—and only that could save us.”

But the experience of the face-off between Angela Merkel and Alexis Tsipras has brought this issue to life. A lesser thinker would just denounce the neoliberal program of austerity and applaud the tactics of the government in Athens and leave it at that. Habermas does all that, but he also refuses to budge from his demand for European democratization. He knows why people are wary (and weary) of European institutions. And he doesn’t blame them: “The process of European unification...was conducted above the heads of the population from the very beginning,” and those who built European institutions are persisting “unapolo-

getically in...the disenfranchisement of the European citizens.”

The social consequences in Athens have been frightful. But opposition from social democrats needs to emphasize democracy as well as social goods and not to connive at the technocrat’s “overtly writing off democracy as merely decorative.” Habermas cannot be accused of that, nor can he be accused of not taking the European experiment seriously. His combination of these positions amounts to a standing reproach to what he denounces as the “constipated manner in which the German government perceives its leadership role.” □

## Curiosity

by Alberto Manguel.  
Yale University Press,  
377 pp., \$30.00

When he was sixteen Alberto Manguel met the nearly blind Jorge Luis Borges in the Pygmalion Anglo-German bookshop in Buenos Aires and, from 1964 to 1968, read aloud to him on a weekly basis. The encounter now seems to have been destined, for if there’s anyone alive today who is as widely read and bibliomaniacal as Borges was in his day, it’s the author of *Curiosity*, the latest in a series of Manguel’s meditations about reading, libraries, and the spectral spaces in the human psyche that literary works occupy.

Books have defined Manguel’s life. Though he was born in Buenos Aires, he spent his first seven years in Israel, where his father served as the Argentinian ambassador, before returning to Argentina after the fall of Juan Perón in 1955. Raised by a Czech nanny, with whom he spoke German, Manguel could not communicate with his Spanish-speaking parents until after the family returned to Argentina. (“I spent no time with my parents,” he recalled in a recent interview. “I said good morning to them some mornings. That’s all I can remember.”) In his youth he became an obsessive reader, and early on books became a kind of homeland for him.

Thus, after residing in Paris, London, and Tahiti in the 1970s, and then moving to Toronto in 1982, Manguel left Canada in 2000 (retaining his Canadian citizenship), for no other reason than to find a spacious enough place to house his personal library of over 30,000 volumes. That library now fills a restored medieval presbytery near Châtellerault, in the southwest of France, where Manguel, when he is not traveling, lives with his extended family of books.

More than a mere collection, Manguel’s library represents the material and spatial extension of his readerly mind; he conveys a sense that posthumous voices and literary characters converse among themselves under his roof. “This transmigration of souls,” we read in *Curiosity*, “is literature’s modest miracle.” In the eighth chapter, Manguel recalls a priest of Basque origin whom he interviewed in his early twenties for a Buenos Aires

newspaper. The priest had moved to Argentina in the 1930s and had a passion for beekeeping. He would speak to his bees in Basque in a gentle voice that contrasted sharply with the vehement tones and gestures with which he spoke Spanish:

It was he who told me that when a beekeeper dies, someone must go and tell the bees that their keeper is dead. Since then I’ve wished that when I die someone will do the same for me, and tell my books that I will not come back.

It is this devotion to books, and his ability to bring them alive in his own gentle beekeeper’s voice, that have endeared Manguel to his many admirers in America and abroad, making him a favorite on the international literary lecture circuits. Like many of the other publications that established his worldwide reputation as a man of letters—*A History of Reading*, *A Reader on Reading*, *The Library at Night*, *A Reading Diary*, among others—his newest publication shares with its reader the conversation Manguel holds with his books inside his own head.

*Curiosity*, with its vague, indeterminate title, refers to a staggering number of writers, religious traditions, artworks, manuscript histories, and

various learned commentaries, like Maimonides’s twelfth-century *Laws for the Study of the Torah*, the early-seventeenth-century Inca Garcilaso’s *Comentarios reales* (a detailed account of the language, government, religion, and customs of the Incas), and Sansevero’s early-eighteenth-century “Universal Dictionary of the Art of War,” left unfinished at the letter O. One gets a sense of what kind of book Manguel has written from the twelve dense pages of its index, which begins with Abelard and ends with Zoroastrianism.

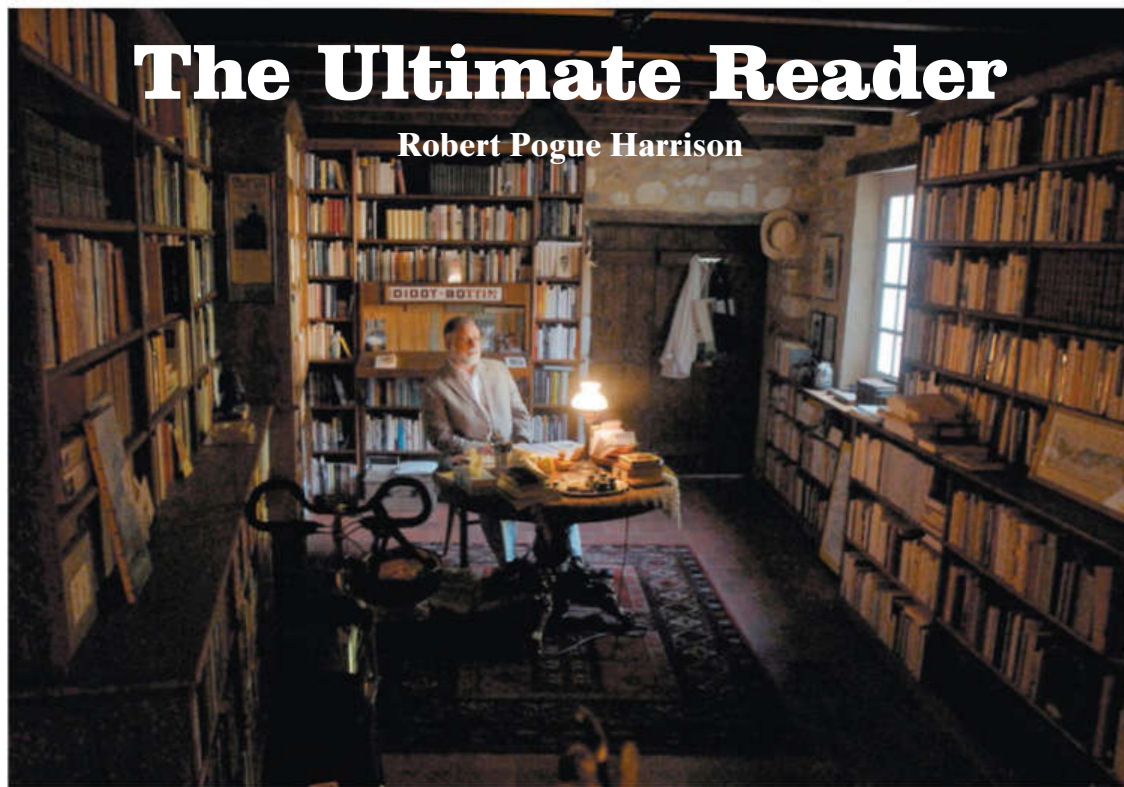
Many of the authors Manguel has written about extensively in the past—Montaigne, Lewis Carroll, Borges, Kafka, Saint Augustine, Aristotle, Plato—return here as major interlocutors. Others are more recent adoptions, preeminent among them Dante, whose *Divine Comedy* serves as the main point of reference in the book. Manguel came to Dante late in his life, when he was almost sixty, but he made up for lost time by mastering the essentials of the *Commedia* in less than a decade, which is no easy feat. Like so many readers before him, he has fallen hard for the Italian poet, finding in the *Commedia* what he wants to find—a dog at Dante’s feet as he wrote it, for instance—whether it’s there in the poem or not (the dog certainly is not).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Manguel’s chapter on dogs in the *Commedia* was recently published by

the NYR Daily; see “Dante’s Dogs,” March 10, 2015.

Certainly the central concept of curiosity is too loosely defined to hold the book together and Manguel feels free to bring together a variety of thoughts under its title. Consider the following passage from Maimonides’s *Laws for the Study of the Torah*:

The time for study [of the Torah] is divided into three parts: one third for the written Torah, one third for the oral Torah, and the last for reflection, drawing conclusions from certain premises, deducing one meaning from another, comparing one thing to another, judging the rules by which the Torah must be studied, until one reaches the knowledge that the Torah is the foundation of the rules, thus learning to understand what is forbidden



Alberto Manguel in his library near Châtellerault, in southwest France, 2007

Alain Jocard/AFP/Getty Images

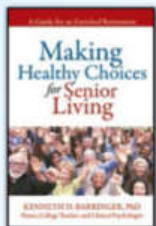
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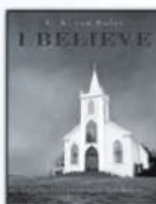
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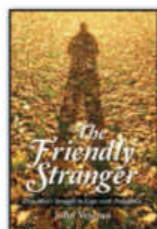
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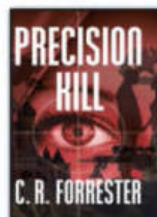
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and what is permitted in that which is learned through hearing. This then is what is called the Talmud.

Now consider Manguel's commentary:

For Maimonides, a scholar who becomes wise need no longer dedicate himself to reading the written Torah (the words of the prophets) or to listening to the oral ones (the learned commentaries) but can devote himself exclusively to studying "according to the measure of his mind and the maturity of his intellect," pursuing his curiosity.

The third part of study, succinctly summarized by Maimonides in its modes of procedure, requires the most rigorous and single-minded focus on the goal of "reach[ing] the knowledge that the Torah is the foundation of the rules" by way of deductive logic, deliberation, comparison, and judgment. To suggest that it all amounts to a "pursuit of curiosity" brings on, as Hegel put it, the night in which all cows are black.

He does not so much argue his claims as advocate them. This can at times be effective, producing flashes of insight, yet it is bound to enervate those who expect a book to make a case. Manguel prefers to assert connections between his sources rather than demarcate, probe, and weigh what the connections amount to. He skims rather than plunges, covering vast surfaces with great celerity. Thus, after his paragraph on Maimonides, the whole of which I've just cited, he advocates a connection (whether thematic, aesthetic, or symptomatic is not clear) between Maimonides's third part of study and the lion in Cima da Conegliano's painting *The Lion of Saint Mark* (1506–1508). He then relates the lion to a horse in Psalm 33, in order to conclude:

Whether exploring the city or exploring the book, between the Word of God spoken and written and the human world, the rider [of the lion] is allowed the freedom to seek that every reader must be allowed to claim.

Manguel claims such freedom for himself in abundance. Speaking of his personal library, he remarks that "in spite of its thematic and alphabetical arrangements, [it] is less a place of order than a benevolent chaos." The same can be said of *Curiosity*, a chaotic book that follows its bliss wherever it may lead. Since the author's pleasure, even joy, is palpable on every page, the chaos remains "benevolent" rather than vexatious, and the reader—or at least this reader—remains for the most part well disposed even in those moments when the book's lack of a center of gravity becomes all but exasperating.

As wide-ranging as Manguel's book is, it has some surprising omissions. Even after one realizes that *Curiosity* is more of a personal testament than an inquiry, one wonders how and why Manguel would ignore altogether the greatest vehicle for curiosity the world has ever known, namely the Internet. One would expect a book that begins with the sentence "I am curious about curiosity" to show a modicum of curiosity about this momentous chapter in the history of what Manguel considers humanity's finest virtue.

Perhaps the word "Internet" conjures

up too many garish spectacles of "idle curiosity," as the Existentialists called it, or lays bare in too vulgar a fashion the wasteful potential of an unfettered "freedom to seek." I am no apologist for the digital age,<sup>2</sup> yet Manguel's only comment on the Internet in *Curiosity* seems hardly adequate in our present historical moment: "The vast oracle of the Internet is less useful to me; probably because I'm a poor navigator of cyberspace, its answers are either too literal or too banal."

Where reflections on the gigantic impact the Internet has had on human curiosity are missing, reflections on Dante abound in excess. In every chapter Manguel returns obsessively to the *Commedia*. This constant circling back does not make the *Commedia* the book's center of gravity, for in fact the poem acts as a tremendous centrifugal force that propels the author in every which direction, depending on the context. For Manguel, Dante figures as the archetype of the curious seeker. I am not sure I agree.

Does Dante's journey represent a quest? Yes. Is the pilgrim curious about the shades he meets, prying their life stories from them? Yes. Does he ask Virgil and Beatrice a series of both factual and speculative questions? Yes. Does this make the *Commedia* the great epic of curiosity? Not necessarily. It all depends on how one understands curiosity. Here too Manguel stretches the concept so thin that it loses much of its purchase:

The great quest which begins in the middle of the journey of our life and ends with a vision of truth that cannot be put into words is fraught with endless distractions, side paths, recollections, intellectual and material obstacles, and dangerous errors.... Concentration or distraction, asking in order to know why or in order to know how, questioning within the limits of what society considers permissible or seeking answers outside those limits: these dichotomies, always latent in the phenomenon of curiosity, simultaneously hamper and drive forward every one of our questions. What persists...is the impulse to seek, as Dante tells us (and Hume intuited). Is this perhaps why, of all the possible modes offered to us by our language, the natural one is the interrogative?

This is nicely put, yet one cannot simply amalgamate and neutralize all these critical dichotomies by reducing them to "the impulse to seek." At some point one must engage the distinctions themselves.

There are crucial distinctions to be drawn, for example, between wonder (the origin of mythology, according to Aristotle), *philosophia* (the desire to know), idle curiosity, and awe. One could add veneration to the list, not to mention scientific inquiry. Even more crucial, yet also neglected by Manguel, is the distinction between seeking that has a goal and seeking that is merely

curious to explore what is out there. If he had to make an either-or choice, Manguel would probably side with exploring over searching, for the essence of curiosity consists for him in a free and receptive openness to discovery, rather than the attainment of an objective. But Manguel does not feel obliged to choose, and he makes of Dante a seeker who is also an explorer—a wayfarer who has a goal, but a goal that keeps receding beyond the horizon, even and especially in the noumenal vision of God that brings the *Commedia* to an end.

I would say instead that over the course of the journey the *Commedia* reveals that Dante is a seeker with a goal and that what drives his quest is not a free-ranging curiosity but something along the lines of "infinite passion," to



Jorge Luis Borges listening to a shell, Palermo, Sicily, 1984

borrow a term from Kierkegaard: the infinite passion of commitment to something unconditional—whatever it may be—which delimits the horizon of possibilities in the very act of opening it up.

When Dante's wayfarer asks sinners to recount their stories, he is not merely curious about them, the way a tabloid journalist might be. His queries serve a dramatic function—that of staging revelations about the truth of God's moral order, as Dante conceived it. This truth is pre-given to the poem's author through his unconditional commitment to Christian faith, even if the dramatic action of the poem presents it as something the wayfarer discovers as his journey proceeds. Likewise when the wayfarer queries Virgil or Beatrice on various matters, it is not so much the questions but the answers he receives that define the author's commitment. There is very little, if any, open-ended questioning in the *Commedia*. *Paradiso* resolves almost every question or quandary that fills the pilgrim's mind in that canticle. The bliss of paradise for Dante lies in the heightened and luminous clarification of Christian truth. His passion is tied not to the interrogative but to the affirmative mode—the *sic et non* of moral, intellectual, and cosmological clarity.

Manguel would of course be justified in insisting that without desire there is no bliss, hence that a certain openness is the enabling condition of Dante's journey. The question, however, is not so much how the *Commedia* begins—in open confusion and a desire to know—but how it ends. In the final analysis the goal the *Commedia* seeks and eventually attains is a very definite kind of closure, or the laying to rest of doubts, questions, and uncertainties.

Manguel declares, "'Why'...is a question far more important in its ask-

ing than in the expectations of an answer.... [It] implicitly places our goal always just beyond the horizon." We hear these words and nod our approval, for the dominant passion of our age is limitlessness—an unbounded craving for more sensation, more knowledge, more life. Ever since the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth century, and perhaps never more so than today, questioning has been exalted as the driving force behind scientific progress. These days we can hardly make sense of the harsh indictments of *mala curiositas* in the Christian tradition—the idea that the desire to know can lead to deleterious consequences when freed from all restraint. Thus Manguel runs little risk with us when he allies himself with open-ended questions over and against answers.

Yet we need to remember that questions in themselves can be feckless. They get their decisive and at times revolutionary force only when they get beyond the curiosity that leaves them hanging, only when they lead to goals that are not "always just beyond the horizon."

I would not go as far as Francis Bacon, who held that curiosity has a productive part in human affairs only when it allows science to transmute uncertainty into certainty and to advance our empirical knowledge by settling matters of fact. Matters of fact are important,

yet what too often gets overlooked in scientific inquiry is the encirclement of facts by a fringe of impenetrability. Matters of fact are the mystery of matter itself, which calls on us to relate to it in another mode than that of questioning—call it submission, wonder, awe, or even terror. Albert Einstein wrote:

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead—his eyes are closed. The insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion.

Einstein, to be sure, stressed to the very end the importance of questioning. "Never lose a holy curiosity," he urged. I like the term "holy curiosity," yet I prefer the term Samuel Beckett's narrator uses in the following passage from the novel *Molloy*:

For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker.

An incurious seeking seems like exactly the right antidote to our present frenzy and hunger for the limitless. It would have a definite goal: to get beyond the dispersions of unholy curiosity and approach the *mysterium* that engulfs the surrounding cosmos, and our being in it. An incurious seeking that would ease our restlessness would also safeguard the sources of infinite passion, of the sort that binds Manguel to his beloved books. □

<sup>2</sup>See my "The Children of Silicon Valley," *NYR Daily*, July 17, 2014.



# How They Failed to Block the Iran Deal

Elizabeth Drew

The president's congressional victory on the nuclear agreement with Iran had many sources, not least of which were the nature and tactics of the opposition. It might have been more difficult to achieve if the Republicans as well as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his allied American group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), had given any sense that they had thoughtfully considered the deal that six nations reached with Iran, or if they had offered any alternative. But the agreement with Iran collided with the current state of American politics.

Once the nuclear deal was presented to Congress in July, there was little question that it would fall into the deep crevasse that had developed between the two political parties. Ever since Barack Obama took office in 2009, the Republicans have opposed everything he wanted to do. In keeping with this strategy, within days of the deal's being announced, numerous Republicans, without bothering to read the agreement or consider it seriously, jumped to oppose it.

The debate on the deal throughout was only ostensibly on its merits. The Republicans' contempt for Obama—as a Democrat, as a black person, as, in the view of many of them, an illegitimate president—was clear to any close observer. For the first time in US history, the opposition party thumbed its nose at the president by inviting the head of another nation—Netanyahu—to address Congress to urge rejection of an international measure the president supported. When Secretary of State John Kerry, a former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, appeared before it to testify on the agreement, he was greeted with overt contempt by its Republican members. The current chairman, Bob Corker of Tennessee, told him, “You’ve been fleeced.”

The fight in Congress over the Iran deal will go down as one of the major foreign policy struggles in this country's history. Legislative fights involving grave issues of the security of this nation are supposedly conducted on a higher level than more typical legislation. But never before in memory was the vitriol so strong as it was in this one. To the extent that this didn't stem from disrespect for the president, its cause was largely that Iran infuriates politicians more than perhaps any other nation except North Korea. Every time an ayatollah says “Death to the Great Satan,” numerous Republicans get very agitated and want to take action—of some sort.

Barack Obama



Mitch McConnell



A great deal of money went into the struggle over the agreement. The lead in opposing it was taken by AIPAC, which aligns itself on Israel's security matters with the Likud party and its leader, Netanyahu. (When the more peace-minded Yitzhak Rabin was prime minister, his relationship with AIPAC was rocky.) Until this fight AIPAC was seen as a fearsome organization with the muscle and money to almost always get its way with Congress. AIPAC and its allies have been reported to have spent as much as \$40 million opposing the agreement, although some estimates are lower. Until this fight, AIPAC had acted as a bipartisan organization, but in vehemently opposing the deal it became an ally of the Republicans in a highly partisan fight.

Allied with AIPAC were other Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League; various local Jewish Federations; the Zionist Organization of America, which—on the day of the Senate's voting and with the deal's proponents clearly winning—sponsored a rally on Capitol Hill against the deal, featuring Ted Cruz and Donald Trump. The casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson poured millions into this fight through the National Zionist Organization. Also active were Bill Kristol's Emergency Committee for Israel and the Republican Jewish Coalition, a very ideologically hawkish group, which in 2008 linked Obama to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, and Patrick Buchanan. It was understood by the Republican presidential candidates that strong opposition to the deal was a possible route to big campaign contributions from Adelson. The candidates were divided only over whether

they would kill the deal on their first day in office or give it a little more time.

On the other side, favoring the deal, were J Street, the Arms Control Association, MoveOn.org, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, the National Iranian American Council, the anti-nuclear Ploughshares Fund, the Council for a Livable World, and Catholic leaders. J Street, a group founded in 2008 that favors a two-state solution, supported the deal. J Street had a lot less money than AIPAC to spend on this fight, but it had enough to mount a big challenge to it.

While both AIPAC and J Street are called “pro-Israel,” the principal difference between them is that J Street doesn't think it must support every position of the Israeli government—especially if it believes that something that the government proposes or does isn't in Israel's or the US's interest. J Street has been critical, for example, of Israeli settlements in the West Bank as a barrier to a two-state solution. Whatever the personal tensions between Obama and Netanyahu—Netanyahu's pedantry in lecturing Obama in the Oval Office on the perils of Israel's situation visibly annoyed him—Obama has maintained and even strengthened US military ties with Israel.

The Catholic leaders who backed the deal included Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the former archbishop of Washington, and the influential United States Conference of Bishops—all endorsing the negotiations with Iran as taking a peaceful approach.

Pope Francis himself said in January that he hoped that a “definitive

agreement may soon be reached between Iran and the P5+1 group regarding the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes,” and he endorsed the negotiations underway. The Vatican later endorsed the deal.

Of the fourteen Catholic senators whose position on the deal wasn't certain, thirteen voted for it, the lone dissenter being Joe Manchin of West Virginia, who had made positive statements about it but on the morning the voting was to begin disappointed the pro-deal advocates by announcing that he opposed it. Manchin said that as he traveled around his state during the August recess he found that his constituents were very strongly opposed to the deal (Obama is quite unpopular in West Virginia).

A battle of lists broke out: each side presented lists of eminent people who were for or against the deal. Those for it included five former ambassadors to Israel and

other foreign policy officials; nuclear scientists; retired generals; rabbis (over three hundred of them); and former members of Congress—some of them with a strong record of supporting Israel. The lists against the deal also included former generals and admirals (over two hundred of them), among them John Poindexter and Richard Secord, major figures in the Iran-contra scandal; and retired Lieutenant General William G. “Jerry” Boykin, who served under George W. Bush and gave speeches calling US operations against Islamic extremist groups war between Christians and Satan.

Each side had support from Israeli officials: current ones were against the deal, while former heads of intelligence and the military said that it was good for Israel's security. Each side had some of these officials flown over to meet with members of Congress. The lists were considered particularly important on the pro side of the argument, giving that view legitimacy. Even more important, though, especially on the side supporting the deal, were former foreign policy officials, such as Brent Scowcroft, Richard Lugar, Sam Nunn, and particularly Colin Powell, who in his appearance on *Meet the Press* on the Sunday before the voting was to begin in Congress made a powerful case for the deal.

The Iran deal was the president's highest foreign policy priority and it represented a major break with the past. In 2008 the candidate Obama had said that the United States should be prepared to negotiate with its adversaries. Many, including his opponent Hillary



Clinton, called this unrealistic and naive. But Obama has made a historic move in offering recognition of Cuba, and now was making a breakthrough with the Iran agreement.

The president treated the agreement as an executive action that didn't require congressional approval—as opposed to a treaty that required the approving votes of two thirds of the Senate, a requirement its proponents had no chance of meeting. While Obama was correct that the Iran deal didn't have to be approved by Congress, that view didn't reflect political reality. Not just the deal's Republican opponents but several Democrats, some already troubled by US actions in Iraq and Syria that were proceeding without new congressional authorization, also wanted Congress to have a voice on the agreement.

In early May, by a vote of 98–1, legislation proposed by the Republican Bob Corker of Tennessee and the Democrat Ben Cardin of Maryland was passed by the Senate. The two parties in the Committee on Foreign Relations agreed that a resolution to disapprove the deal—which was likely, since the Republicans were in control of the Senate—would have to win sixty votes, rather than the fifty-one that Corker had originally proposed; the requirement of sixty votes was both the usual practice in the Senate and the price of getting Democrats to agree to a resolution injecting Congress into the issue and keeping the White House from strongly opposing that. (The House required a simple majority vote to approve or disapprove the deal.) The sixty-vote requirement gave the deal's supporters an advantage in trying to block a resolution of disapproval, since there was likely a majority in the Senate (of fifty-one votes) who were against the deal. Its supporters needed just forty-one votes to block a resolution against it.

The sixty-vote requirement to bring anything of consequence up in the Senate had become customary. Ever since Obama took office Senate Republicans had made a habit of “filibustering”—whether or not they engaged in an actual talkathon, which they rarely did—all significant legislation. The crucial point is that it requires sixty votes for “cloture,” to end a filibuster before the underlying measure can be brought to a vote, and that measure would require just fifty-one votes to be passed.

In reality, even if Congress were to adopt a resolution of disapproval, that wouldn't kill the Iran agreement. The president had the power to veto the resolution and if the veto is upheld by Congress the agreement is in effect approved. The president still had the power to implement it, but of course a president would prefer not to be carrying out an agreement that had been disapproved by Congress.

Supporters of the deal were also at an advantage if it came to sustaining a presidential veto of a negative resolution: since it takes two thirds of both the Senate and the House to override a veto, the forces in favor of the deal needed only thirty-four votes in the Senate and 146 votes in the House to uphold the president's veto. It had been assumed for some time that the House would sustain the veto, since in the spring 150 Democrats had signed a letter that endorsed the president's

approach to negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran.

But as early as last spring it occurred to both the White House and the outside groups backing the Iran agreement that if, as it appeared, they could obtain enough commitments in the Senate to sustain the veto, they should go further and try to prevent a resolution against the deal from ever reaching the president's desk. Since sixty votes were required to pass the resolution, if the advocates of the deal could muster forty-one votes, the resolution would die in the Senate and that would be the end of it. To prevail by the larger number of votes would put the president in a stronger position. Despite his earlier expressions of willingness, Obama didn't want to exercise his veto on the Iran deal.

Meanwhile the proponents of the deal were systematically trying to seal off avenues of escape that some Democratic senators appeared interested in taking. They wanted to avoid making the difficult choice between handing the president a defeat or alienating AIPAC as well as their constituents who strongly opposed the deal. Polls indicated that the public at large was against the deal, though the numbers varied depending on how well it was explained to survey respondents.

Some polls also indicated that a majority of Jews supported the deal, though they were of course deeply divided. Newspaper reports saying that so-and-so's constituency has a large Jewish population told us little. For one thing, it's not the number of people who are on each side of an issue but the intensity with which one particular side pursues its goal. This is true of bills about tax deductions and agriculture subsidies and it was true of the Iran deal. (It's also true in presidential races.) For some Jews who subscribe to the views of AIPAC and its allies, there is to be no daylight between what Israel wants and US policy. The Jews who felt free to criticize an act by Israel, or deny it certain military equipment, tended to align with the views of J Street. Of the nine Jewish senators only Charles Schumer of New York and Ben Cardin voted against the treaty.

Shortly before the August recess Democratic Senator Dick Durbin, the party's whip, arranged a meeting in which representatives of each of the members of the P5+1 countries—China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany—briefed Democratic senators who wished to attend; twenty-five did. The representatives made it clear that the talk on the part of the agreement's skeptics or outright opponents that it should be junked in favor of a “better deal” was fantasy. They emphasized that their countries had no interest whatever in returning to the negotiations (not to mention the lack of interest on the part of Iran).

The P5+1 representatives emphasized that they had gotten the best deal they could, and further, that if the US rejected the deal there was hardly any chance, or no chance at all, that their countries would continue to adhere to the tough economic sanctions that had been imposed on Iran, most of which had been intended to put pressure on it to negotiate. On the contrary, the spokesmen for the allies said that their governments and companies were eager

to start doing business with Iran. This meeting was said to have been highly persuasive among undecided Democrats. And it effectively removed one of the major arguments opponents had been using. Durbin's purpose wasn't to overtly pressure his colleagues to support the deal but to find out who was leaning which way and what was on doubters' minds so that he might find ways to get their votes.

No one was very surprised when, in early August, Senator Charles Schumer, the presumed next Democratic leader, announced that he would oppose the deal. Schumer was known to be quite close to AIPAC and to support Likud. Still, his decision to vote against the deal disappointed some of his col-



President Obama meeting with Charles Schumer and other senators at the White House, January 2015

leagues, who hoped that he would opt to bring his constituents along to a position in support of it. One observer said, “Chuck had his Edmund Burke moment, and he flunked.” Some of his colleagues reasoned that Schumer announced when he did—rather than, as expected, toward the end of the time when senators were making up their minds—because he could see that the deal would succeed in Congress and he didn't want his position to be seen as irrelevant. Schumer vowed not to try to influence his colleagues' vote and the indications are that he kept his word.

The deal's supporters worried, though, when they learned in early September that Ben Cardin was raising questions such as: Won't the deal survive even if it's rejected by Congress? (Cardin ended up opposing the deal, a potential blow to it.)

While Durbin and Nancy Pelosi were tracking the votes in their respective chambers, the president took a larger part and also played rougher in this fight than had been his custom. He accused Republicans of “making common cause” with Iran's hard-liners. He stated that the alternatives were the deal or war. Even some of his allies thought he'd gone a bit overboard with these statements, potentially alienating some undecided Democrats, and he pulled back from them. Obama responded to the requests by Pelosi and Durbin to make calls to wavering Democrats, more calls than he'd made on any previous legislation. He held special briefings in the White House for

members of Congress; he participated in a conference call with the outside groups on his side. The White House set up an “anti-war room” to keep track of the votes and send out information.

By mid-August the forces who favored the Iran agreement believed that they would have at least enough votes in the Senate (thirty-four, or one third plus one) to sustain a veto by the president, though they dared not openly claim this until the thirty-four senators had publicly announced their position. And they were fairly far along on their second goal of killing the negative resolution in the Senate, but still far enough from success to be worried: by the time Congress returned from the August recess on September 8 the deal's supporters were within eight votes of the forty-one needed to stop the resolution of disapproval in the Senate.

Among those they had been very concerned about was Cory Booker of New Jersey, known to be quite close to Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, a flamboyant Orthodox rabbi, best-selling author, and radio and television host who was passionately against the Iran deal. But on September 3, Booker announced he was for the deal; in his long, painstaking statement he said,

After hours and hours of study, research, deliberation and consultation, I am more convinced than ever that eliminating the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran is among the most important global security challenges of our time... I...believe it is better to support a deeply flawed deal, for the alternative is worse.

Booker called for several steps to mollify Israel, including providing it with massive ordnance penetrators, otherwise known as “bunker busters,” or MOPs, which have the capacity to take out nuclear facilities, and sanctions against “Iranian terrorism.”

Statements by Booker and other Democrats who supported the deal that it was “flawed” were largely acts of political positioning—to provide some protection against constituents skeptical of or opposed to the deal, or against future issues that might arise, for example, over whether the Iranians were cheating. The core of the argument for the deal was offered by Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, who said in mid-August that he'd support the deal, because “I do not see another pathway to impose a nuclear weapons-free Iran.”

Since the Republicans offered no alternative, it came down to either the deal putting off Iranian development of a nuclear weapon for at least fifteen years or no deal, which according to experts meant that Iran could develop a nuclear weapon within a year or two, but no one can be certain. And with no deal, the sanctions would come to an end. The Republicans had no difficulty distorting the truth about the deal. But the opponents were trapped in their own illogic: they charged that the agreement prepared the way for a nuclear Iran in fifteen years. Whether or not Iran developed a nuclear bomb after fifteen years, without the deal Iran could develop a nuclear bomb a lot sooner. Moreover, some monitor-



ing would remain in effect for twenty years and some would be permanent. Senator John Cornyn of Texas—the Republican whip—and others asserted that all verification could be held up by Iran for twenty-four days, whereas the twenty-four-day provision applies only to suspected sites and sets a limit, not a goal. Known sites are to be subject to twenty-four-hour on-site inspections.

AIPAC was known to be urging members of Congress to consider—after the voting on the deal—a package of weapons, including bunker busters (controversial because they're considered provocative weapons) and sophisticated bombers, to comfort Israel. AIPAC representatives reportedly told senators who were torn on how to vote that it wouldn't punish them if they both voted for the deal and also supported the new weaponry for Israel, and also sanctioned Iran for acts of terrorism. But some of the provisions of the AIPAC proposal would have the effect of strangling the nuclear deal in its cradle by imposing new sanctions or not removing existing ones as directed by the agreement.

As of September 8, the day that debate was to begin in the Senate, the proponents needed three out of the five remaining undeclared Democrats to bottle up the negative resolution in the Senate. As it turned out four came through on that day: Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, one of the most skeptical Democrats; Gary Peters of Michigan; Ron Wyden of Oregon; and Maria Cantwell of Washington. When the fifth, Joe Manchin, came out against the deal that morning, its backers worried that others might follow, but they didn't. On this issue, members didn't try to influence one another; it was considered a vote of conscience that each had to decide for themselves. Seldom has an issue caused more study and consultation with officials and experts on the part of the legislators as the nuclear deal with Iran did.

Mitch McConnell wasn't at all happy. In a statement in Kentucky in mid-August he'd grudgingly conceded that the president had "a great likelihood of success" because "the procedure is obviously stacked in the president's favor." Back in Washington, McConnell didn't intend to give up easily. He proceeded to simply ignore the agreement of the members of the Foreign Relations Committee that the resolution would be considered on its merits and would require sixty votes to pass.

He knew he could win Senate approval of the pending resolution disapproving the deal if only a majority, or fifty-one votes, were needed, and so he announced that he would move to invoke cloture, or try for sixty votes to shut off debate, and then he could bring up the negative resolution, for which he would need only a majority. That way, he could send the resolution to the White House and force the president to veto it. McConnell's maneuver made important senators angry, among them Cardin and Tim Kaine of Virginia, another architect of the Corker-Cardin bill. They insisted that, largely thanks to McConnell himself, the number sixty had become customary on consequential legislation.

At this point, the Senate and those watching it entered a hall of mirrors.

McConnell and other Republicans were determined to claim that the Democrats had filibustered the resolution of disapproval. "Filibuster" is still considered by many politicians to be a negative word. If the Democrats insisted on sixty votes, McConnell maintained, sixty votes are required for cloture, or closing off a filibuster; therefore, they were filibustering even if they weren't. John Cornyn cried out in the Senate chamber that it was "shocking" that the Democrats were filibustering. No they weren't, maintained Harry Reid and other Democrats; they argued not only that the Corker-Cardin proponents had agreed on sixty votes, but also that Reid had twice offered to let a vote on the resolution occur after two days of debate. The Democrats now had forty-two votes. They had no



need to filibuster to try to defeat the resolution. This back-and-forth was actually for the purpose of establishing talking points for later.

But McConnell prevailed, and on the vote on cloture, the Democrats held firm and McConnell's side went down by a vote of fifty-eight for cloture, two votes short, and forty-two against it. With McConnell's failure to impose cloture, the resolution to disapprove the Iran deal couldn't come up for a vote on its merits. And so the resolution died. This was the most important vote in the entire congressional consideration of the deal—a consideration the Senate had taken upon itself in the Corker-Cardin bill—and it represented a major victory for the Democrats, who lost only four votes to the Republicans (Schumer, Menendez, Cardin, and Manchin), and it was a triumph for the president.

But McConnell wasn't ready to give up: if he demanded more roll calls and could somehow peel off enough worried Democrats to get sixty votes for cloture, he could still get the Senate to pass the resolution of disapproval.

Political debates about big issues often contain an ample amount of faux outrage, but the frustrated McConnell seemed truly angry. He'd lost not just the key vote, but also on the Iran deal itself, and he still wanted to force the president to veto the resolution of disapproval—even though the votes were now available in both chambers to block an override of a veto. Referring to the Democrats' effort to protect the president from having to veto the resolution of disapproval, McConnell shouted to the Democratic side of the

Senate chamber, "What are you afraid of?" McConnell called for yet another roll call on cloture in the following week. But it was most unlikely that any Democrats would change their minds. Too much study and consideration had gone into the decision to back it, and their position on the issue had been announced with both fanfare and the reasoning behind it.

For its part, while the Senate was voting, the House of Representatives displayed its own version of our current politics by descending into chaos. A contingent on the far right of the Republicans rebelled against the leadership and stopped the House from proceeding. The rebellion was as much against Speaker John Boehner, who the Tea Party members and other very conservative members feel is insufficiently militant, as against the ground rules for the debate. But the rebellion was quickly put down and the House defeated a resolution to approve the deal (as opposed to the resolution to disapprove that was before the Senate). The far right got the idea that a straight-out vote against the deal would be more impressive, even if by this time, in view of the vote in the Senate, it was meaningless.

The opponents tried to play down the president's victory—and their loss—by saying that he'd won with a minority of votes. But those were the rules that Republicans were usually happy to play by, and the requirement of two thirds also for approval of a treaty suggest that the founders believed that foreign policy initiatives should have broad backing. Though the president had resisted a congressional voice in the nuclear agreement with Iran, he ended up strengthened by the process. The US congress—the only legislature other than Iran's to have any say in the deal—had considered it but not disapproved it.

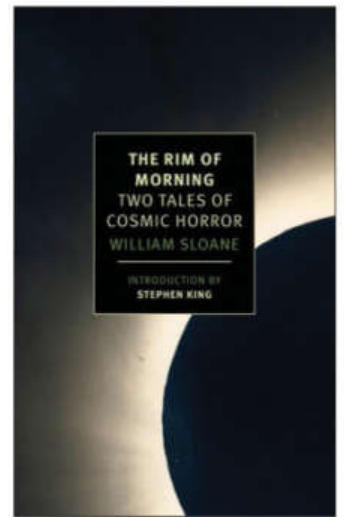
After the voting was done, the various parties that had been against the deal had to reassess their situation. Netanyahu's blustery involvement in partisan US politics had backfired badly. His ambassador was in bad odor with the administration and numerous Democrats on Capitol Hill. Netanyahu and Obama will try to improve their relationship when they meet in the Oval Office on November 9. AIPAC was divided between those who wanted to move on and those who wanted to keep the issue going by demanding more roll-call votes on the Iran agreement as time went on. The Iran deal was now threatened with becoming the foreign policy Obamacare.

Meanwhile, Ben Cardin was working with the White House and other senators who called for more help for Israel as they voted for the deal. He began putting together a package of further military aid to Israel, sanctions for Iran's support of terrorist groups, and also military aid for US allies in the Gulf region. It's only realistic to expect charges in the future from, say, Israel that Iran is cheating in some way and demands for further action, as well as all-too-familiar criticism of the International Atomic Energy Association inspectors in Iran of being slack on the job.

Thus the congressional voting over the Iran deal was far from the end of the matter.

—This is the first part of a two-part article.

"These two novels are best read after dark, I think, possibly on an autumn night with a strong wind blowing the leaves around outside." —Stephen King



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LETTERS

‘WHAT’S WRONG’  
WITH THE ECONOMY?

To the Editors:

Though I am not an economist, I do read articles and columns by economists. One of my interests in doing so is to see if any attention is paid either to the natural world or to the economies of land use. Though “the economy” obviously depends upon both nature and land use, those subjects are rarely mentioned, let alone attended to.

At the risk of trying your patience, I will point out that “What Is Wrong with the West’s Economies?” [NYR, August 13] by Edmund Phelps makes no mention of nature or “natural resources” or any land-using economy. He speaks once of “rural life” in order, tritely, to dismiss it from any concern or importance. And he speaks once of “the crops”—“the crops may be growing...”—but that is a trope. The crops in fact “may be” growing, but he takes for granted that they are.

In *The New York Times* for August 14, another expert of economics, Steven Rattner, also grants a moment’s notice to land use. Many manufacturing jobs have been lost, he says, “to growing efficiency, just as employment in agriculture in the United States has fallen even as output has risen.” He does not say, because he does not know or is indifferent, that this agricultural “efficiency” is the substitution of enormous machinery and toxic chemicals (soil erosion and pollution) for human work and care.

It is a fact that industrial land use from mining to farming is massively destructive of everything involved, of land and people and of all that pertains to both. Everything in “the economy” is affected by this willing destructiveness. If Mr. Phelps thinks that such an economy can be righted by adding “imagination and creativity” to it, then you farm-raised city people ought to have some questions for him.

Wendell Berry  
Port Royal, Kentucky

Edmund Phelps replies:

As a grandson of farmers in downstate Illinois, I have long admired the dedication of farmers to their work and have written about the role of agriculture in American innovation. In my book *Mass Flourishing* I mention Virgil’s epic poem *Georgics*, celebrating a Po Valley landowner bent on ever-greater knowledge of planting, plowing, tending cattle, and beekeeping. But farming has not been engaging always and everywhere. Mr. Berry appears irked by my perception that the “rural life of mercantile times, with its routine and isolation,” could not compare to “modern life in businesses and cities.”

Mr. Berry’s complaint, however, is with modernity itself. I was struck years ago by a line by the writer Bill McKibben, who, discussing Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, wrote that “she was the very first person to knock some of the shine off modernity.” Now Mr. Berry wants not just to disallow innovations causing environmental damage and to regulate new methods and products known to be hazardous. He says outright that he is against the “romance” of innovators “plunging ahead without knowing fully the consequences.”

But such plunges are a key part of the West’s modern project. If every effect of any new products or methods were required to be known before they could be produced and marketed, they would not be true innovations—and thus not represent new knowledge of what people would like, if offered. Businesses would not be allowed to seek new knowledge, thus barred from venturing to innovate.

The West’s modern project appears to be jeopardized from every side. Free speech is ever more limited, university classes are more restricted, schoolteachers may no longer experiment, and most new products

have to be tested for every conceivable side effect before they can be approved.

Those of us born into vitalist and expressionist cultures must hope that governments will draw back from shutting down the modernist project of exploring, experimenting, and imagining—of voyaging into the unknown—that has been essential for rewarding lives.

ART & SKEPTICISM

To the Editors:

While I am pleased to be quoted by Jed Perl in “The Perils of Painting Now” [NYR, September 24], I’m not sure I recognize his description of me as “bemused” and “bewildered” by “a lot of contemporary painting.” The problem may come from a loss of nuance when he quotes the following sentence from my 2009 *Art in America* article “Provisional Painting”: “Why would an artist demur at the prospect of a finished work, court self-sabotaging strategies, sign his or her name to a painting that looks, from some perspectives, like an utter failure?” One aim of this sentence was to put myself in the place of a viewer coming for the first time on the work of Raoul De Keyser, Mary Heilmann, or Albert Oehlen, a viewer who might have difficulty reconciling these “self-sabotaging” paintings with more conventional displays of skill and mastery. Since I immediately go on to link this approach to Cézanne, Picabia, Giacometti, and other exemplars of what I call the “foundational skepticism” of modern art, I imagined it would be clear to readers that I believed there were excellent reasons for such approaches. My identification of “provisional painting” issued out of my great admiration for the artists in question, whereas the more recent coinages Perl cites (“Crapstraction” and “Zombie Formalism”) are expressions, merited or not, of disapproval and snark.

Raphael Rubinstein  
New York City

Jed Perl replies:

Perhaps it is Raphael Rubinstein who has given my words an insufficiently nuanced reading. He himself explains that he began his essay “Provisional Painting” by putting himself in the position of a skeptical gallerygoer. Which would seem to be his way of dealing with precisely the widespread bewilderment I was reporting. I never said that Rubinstein didn’t like the work of De Keyser, Heilmann, or Oehlen. As for his connecting their work with what he calls the “foundational skepticism” of modern art, this brings us to a fundamental disagreement. The thrust of my essay is that what Rubinstein calls the skepticism of Cézanne and Giacometti—and Maurice Merleau-Ponty memorably referred to as Cézanne’s “doubt”—was grounded in a sincerity that is alien to many (but by no means all) contemporary painters.

CORRECTION

In Isaiah Berlin’s letter on Joseph Alsop [NYR, October 8], the Saint-Simon to which Berlin referred was the memoirist Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon (1675–1755), not Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon.

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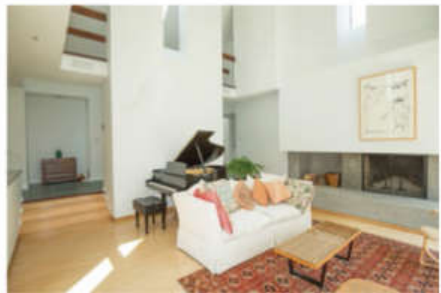
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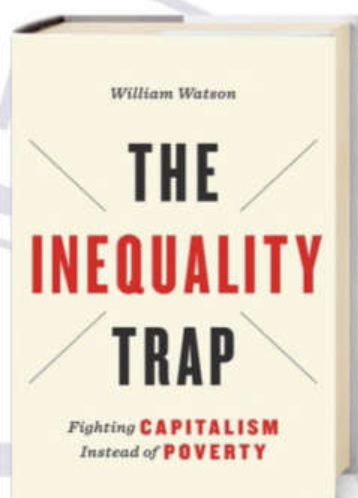
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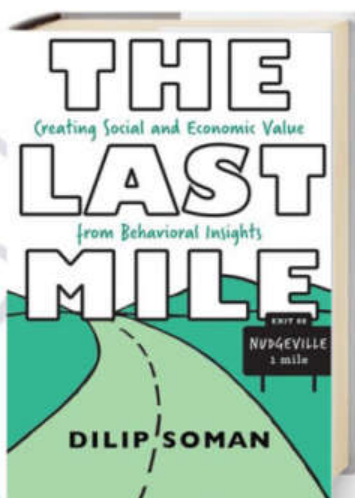


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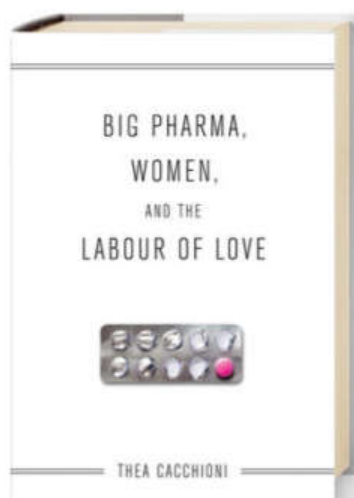


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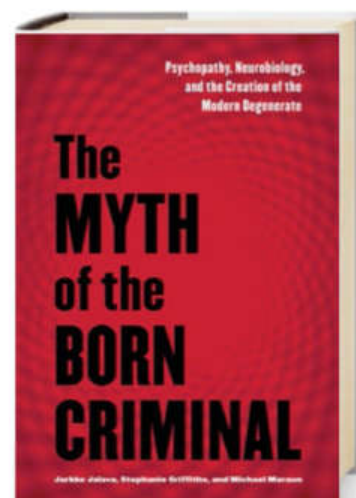
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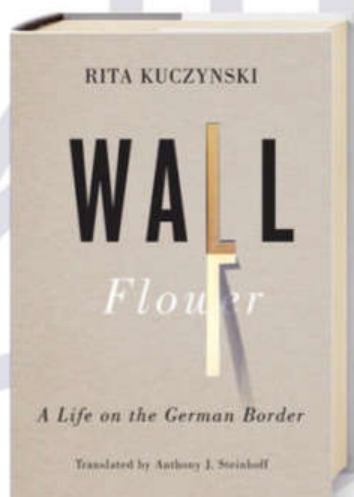


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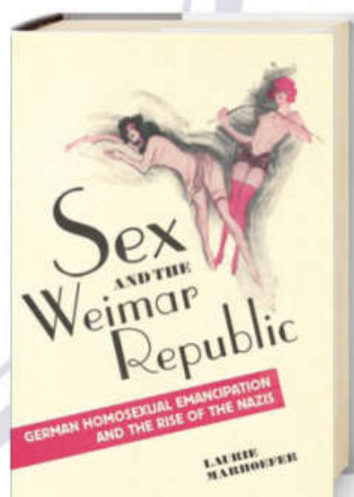


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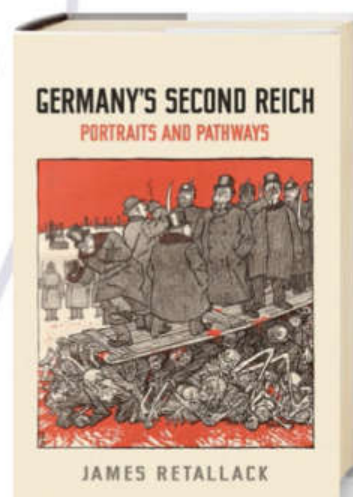


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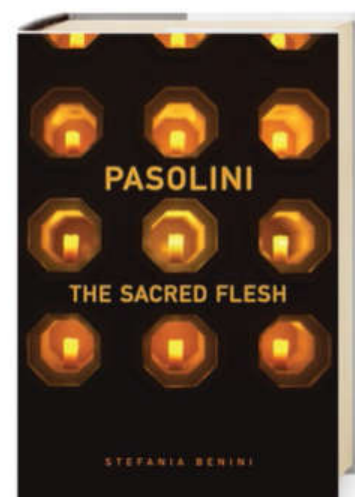


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